

## All is Fair in Love and Football

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## All is Fair in Love and Football

by [graciegirl2001](#)

### Summary

The first time George Vincent meets Dream, the latter is passed out on the grass outside a college apartment in nothing but his boxers, the beer can in his hand leaking into the dirt.

Charming.

In which George is the captain of the cheer team, Dream is an up and coming football star, and George spends a great deal of time avoiding said up and coming football star like the plague.

### Notes

Well, I finally bit the bullet and decided to partake in this fun, self indulgent AU!

Just so you're aware, my knowledge of cheerleading and football is limited, so bear with me haha. Hopefully my research will do the trick. Also, there are some possible trigger warnings, so please read the tags.

Make sure to subscribe if you'd like to see more, and consider leaving a comment! Feedback is always appreciated. If you'd like to come yell at me you can find me here: [Twitter Tumblr](#). (I will be posting updates there as well.)

Enjoy!

# Chapter 1

The first time George Vincent meets Dream, the latter is passed out on the grass outside a college apartment in nothing but his boxers, the beer can in his hand leaking into the dirt.

Charming.

At the time, George was on his way out of the building, the pounding migraine in his skull driving him far away from the party goers.

"You sure you don't want to stay a bit longer?" Karl had shouted over the terrible EDM music blasting through the hallways. "I'm sure we can raid the cabinets for some ibuprofen."

George merely shook his head. "I've got to go home and study anyway. This is just an excuse to actually be responsible for once."

The party had been a bad idea in the first place. George hardly knew this Sapnap guy hosting it- some random underclassmen football jock apparently- and in the back of his head was an all too apparent awareness of the early morning cheer practice looming over him tomorrow.

When an enthusiastic Karl and Quackity had first approached them all with the proposition, Bad, maintaining his spot as the smartest one of the friend group, took the easy way out by repeating his mantra of "I don't do parties." George desperately wishes now that he had borrowed the same excuse, but his friends' promise of free drinks and a little reprieve from the dreariness of studying, had been too great. With little effort, he was convinced.

In the end though, the beer was shitty, Sapnap's taste in music was terrible, and Quackity, ever the social butterfly, disappeared an hour ago to get snacks and never returned. What had been a comfortable buzz in George's head evolved quickly into a miserable headache a few drinks in, and as he stumbles through the door, he finds himself longing desperately for nothing more than the comfort of his bed, and a cool cloth over his eyes.

But of course that's too much to ask.

Because now here's this fucker- with his impossibly long leg slung over the porch right where George needs to walk. The guy on the ground looks altogether pathetic, his shaggy, blondish brown hair tossed every which way, with clumps of grass and dirt woven in.

It wouldn't have been a bother, but as George plunges forward in his rush to get home, his foot catches on an outstretched ankle.

He falls forward rather ungracefully, barely managing to catch himself before he hits the ground.

At the sudden contact, the lump in the grass grunts and peeked open one eye blearily. A half-conscious, doozy, lopsided smile crosses the bleary, unfamiliar face.

Had he not feared he would miss and embarrass himself further, George might have thrown his empty solo cup at him.

"Why hello," Boxers man says, and George rolled his eyes in disgust. This is the last thing he needs tonight.

"Go back to sleep asshat," he replies with a shake of his head.

Boxers man tries and fails to sit up, instead flopping back on the grass, arms outstretched. "You're very pretty," he mumbles with a giggle.

*"Oh you've got to be kidding me,"* George thinks to himself, but in moment of betrayal, flushes ever so slightly despite himself. "And you're very drunk," he says back, trying to avoid the startlingly green eyes.

The man looks down at himself, as if realizing his precarious situation for the first time. He has the decency to look sheepish, a deep blush rising to his freckled cheekbones. "Oh."

A snort bubbles up within George, but he forces it down, schooling his expression to maintain its displeasure.

"Yeah oh. Now if you don't mind, I've got incredibly boring things to do, and I don't want you keeping them from me any longer. Good night," George huffs with curt nod, masking his amusement with annoyance. And he is annoyed, really. But there is something disarmingly charming about this strange naked man that he doesn't care to admit. Still, he stalks off confidently down the front walk, only stumbling once. And though a part of him wants to, George does not look back to see if the man in the grass watched him leave.

\*\*\*\*\*

The game is in its final moments.

George relishes the buzzing excitement and tension in the air- the roar of the crowd pushing impossibly louder every moment. College students of all varieties lean forward over the bleacher balcony, shouting and stomping their feet. Some have their faces painted with stripes of green and white, others with strips of paint on their bare chests instead, pounding them like apes. George rolls his eyes at the sight, but his lips quirk upward regardless. After all, school spirit is school spirit. On the right side of the front row Quackity and Bad are wedged in between two massive, shirtless men whooping and hollering through plastic megaphones. Quackity shoves one of them after an intense play nearly sends him head first off the platform, shouting an offended "Do you mind??"

The men don't respond, and Bad pats him on the shoulder, laughing. George smiles wide from his place on the track, heart surging with fondness. His friends are absolute idiots, but he loves them dearly. Bad catches George's eyes on them and nudges Quackity, inclining his head toward him. They both wave energetically as George lines up for the next formation.

The cheer team can hardly hear the music over the rumble of the crowd, but they know the routine by heart, not faltering. George glances at Niki to his left, who grins before she goes flying into the air with graceful ease, landing perfectly balanced atop one of the other girls' hands. The student section cheers, their eyes torn away from the field momentarily. As Niki and the other freshmen girls descend and spread into lines, George claps twice- a sound that is echoed by the rest of the cheer team. His voice rings out clear above the others.

"Take it to the goal, Go! Fight! Win! First and ten let's do it again!"

The chant repeats, getting picked up by the crowd.

*Take it to the goal, Go! Fight Win! First and ten let's do it again!*

George lines himself up across from Karl, who grins, eyes bright. With a nod, they rock back on one foot, arms extended. In a fluid movement that is nearly second nature at this point, George takes a running start and glides into his first front back handspring. Gravity suspends for a

delicious few moments as he rotates one... two... three... times, before tucking midair to land right side up again, arms raised. The crowd applauds, hooting and hollering.

“Those are my best friends!” Quackity shouts, pointing at George and Karl wildly, while Bad follows with a “Let’s go captain!”

George gives them both an appreciative thumbs up, going to retrieve his pom poms next to Karl’s water bottle. He’s been on the team since freshman year, but this is his first year as captain, and it still feels a little unreal. He had been hesitant to accept the offer from Wilbur a few months ago, but their young, optimistic assistant coach offered nothing but trust and encouragement, easing George’s worries.

This year their team was strong. Well, they had always been strong, but under George’s leadership, and thanks to the influx of talented underclassmen, Northview University’s cheer program was looking to be one of the best in the country.

Karl joins him on the sidelines, his cheeks pink with exertion and excitement. “You think we’re gonna cinch it?” He asks, taking a long drink and nodding toward the football field, where the team is currently in a quick time out.

“Of course,” He replies, fishing for his own water bottle. “We’ve got it in the bag.”

“The score is tied George.”

“I’m aware.”

“That’s not necessarily ‘in the bag.’”

“It’s called believing.”

A whistle blows and a referee waves towards the Northview side. Times up.

The clock on the scoreboard returns to the glowing red 00:15. The coach, Schlatt, yells one last direction, tapping his clipboard, and the players head back to the field, slapping each other on the back as they go.

A voice crackles over the loudspeaker announcing the end of the time out. “We’ve got a tied game folks here in the fourth quarter, with a score of twenty-six to twenty-six. Northview has the ball, but will they be able to make something out of it in the limited time left?”

*S-U-C-C-E-S-S,*

*That's the way we spell success*

*V-I-C-T-O-R-Y,*

*Victory, victory, that's our cry!*

Both teams line up, the floodlights glinting off their helmets. They shift with anticipation and the crowd repeats the chant with the cheer squad.

George used to hate football. It was always his older brothers’ and father’s thing. They used to gather in the living room swathed in scarves and hats and sweatshirts for their favorite team (no matter the weather) shouting and celebrating into the late hours of the night. The first few times he joined them, but quickly grew bored. When you’re the youngest, no one bothers to pause and

explain the rules, or tell you which team to root for. Hell, half the time he couldn't even tell the jersey's apart with his colorblindness. So he fell into other interests to pass the time: piano, reading, gymnastics. He picked them all up quickly, but couldn't manage to get his older brothers to match his excitement at mastering a perfect pike. So he sat back, and turned the music up louder on football Sunday's.

Cheer changed all of that. Well... not all of it. He still could barely tell the jerseys apart, and he didn't understand what possessed one to paint your nipples as a way to support your team, but with cheer came an understanding of the basic rules of football. Once he knew *why* everyone either jumped for joy or started cussing each other out at an interception, the game became far more enjoyable. And although George would rather die than join the spirited throng of the student section in his free time, he found himself looking forward to the school wide football games more and more. There was something truly special about hundreds of people waiting with baited breath, collectively hoping and praying a couple of meatheads could catch a stuffed pigskin.

Ok, so maybe he didn't yet possess the same reverence for football the rest of the Vincent family had. But he was learning.

With one grunted word from the quarterback, they are off to the races. Sweaty bodies collide, ramming into each other with equal measures exhaustion and determination. Meanwhile, the clock ticks down continually, an ever constant reminder of what is on the line with these last few plays. George rustles his pom-poms, eyes tracking the movements of the players. They have fought tooth and nail to get this far up the field in the last bit of the game, but without a big play now, there will be no time to push the rest of the way. That's when George sees him. A flash of movement, one body darting past the others up the field along the sideline. George squints. A...green jersey, yeah. One of their own. There are several others in pursuit, but Number 22 has a lead on them. George feels his heart pound faster, sensing his teammates' do the same. This could be it. It all depends on if they see the breakthrough in time. Wright, Northview's star quarterback dances backward, looking for an opening.

*There.*

The football tears through the air with pinpoint accuracy, sailing up the field. The entire stadium holds their breath. The ball descends, curving lower, and lower... and into the hands of 22, who crashes to the ground in the endzone, the football safe in his grasp.

*Touchdown.*

The crowd goes wild, and George whoops along with them.

22. He runs through the list of players in his mind, trying to match a name to the number. Was it Johnson? No- that was Johnson over there on the sidelines with his helmet off. Maybe... Foster? But Foster is shorter than this guy.

The announcer's voice booms, "Touchdown for Northview thanks to an amazing catch by Number 22: Dream Bennett!"

Oh. Of course.

In the endzone, Dream holds up the ball in celebration, waving to the adoring fans in the stands.

George huffs and rolls his eyes, the joy and adrenaline coursing through him dampening somewhat. It would be that cocky bastard.

He hasn't talked to Dream since that night at Sapnap's party months ago, and doesn't intend to. Based on the crowd Dream hangs with, he's just another stupid, oafish asshole. And besides the nasty friends, he has that terrible first impression to go off of. No, George prefers to spend time with people who don't strip and get blackout drunk in front of people's garden gnomes. And... flirt with random strangers.

But with some time between him and Dream, George has since come to the conclusion that what happened that night really wasn't even flirting at all. After all, Dream at the time was so intoxicated he couldn't even stand. And, just by nature of his craft as a football jock, he's probably painfully straight. So really, if he thought about it, Dream's offhand comment was worse than flirting with a stranger. It was mocking. Harassment. George hates him for it still.

But of course he can get away with shit like that because he's *Dream Bennett*. The golden boy. Upcoming MVP for the football team. Resident heartbreaker. The list goes on. George doesn't need a sober conversation with the guy to know to stay clear. So he does. When he goes to parties with the rest of the cheer team he sticks close to Karl and Niki, ducking into a new room if he sees a familiar head of wavy dirty blond hair. He's not about to give Dream the chance to ask if he liked seeing him stripped down last fall.

The last four seconds on the clock go by in a flash, and before George can even process it, the game is over. Final score: 33-26. He hadn't even noticed them kick the field goal.

The spectators storm the field and George curses himself for not getting out early like he usually does. As he is in the process of grabbing his bag, an arm slings around his shoulder.

"Gogyyy," Quackity says, drawing out the last syllable of his nickname, and George shakes off the embrace, rolling his eyes goodnaturedly. "Hello there Big Q."

Quackity chuckles and tweaks his nose, then goes to pounce Karl as he approaches. Karl yelps, dropping his duffel in surprise as Quackity hops onto his back. He struggles to hold him up before they both collapse into a fit of giggles.

"What are we gonna do with these muffinheads," Bad mutters, leaning on one hip by George as he collects his things. George grabs a hoodie from inside his bag and tugs it over his head, letting out a muffled "They're hopeless."

Bad snickers and Quackity and Karl come bounding back to them.

"You guys killed it, as usual," Quackity finally says, out of breath. "I'm so proud of my favorite little cheerleaders," he ruffles the hair on both of their heads, and they both lean away, protesting loudly.

"Agreed. I can tell you all have been working hard. Games just wouldn't be the same without you," Bad adds.

"Speaking of the game," Karl perks up, eyes wide. "You all saw that catch at the end right? That was crazy!"

"Yeah! I'm sure that guy who caught it is riding high right now. I wonder what it must be like to single handedly win the homecoming game in the last fifteen seconds with the most dramatic play this school has seen all year..." Quackity overlaps wistfully.

"It wasn't really singlehanded. Wright was the one who made the throw," George replies evenly.

"Aw screw that guy, he's on his way out. Hell, replace him with 22 and watch us really win the

championship.”

George tries not to let their excitement get under his skin too much. Dream’s five minutes of fame will blow over soon enough. It happens all the time in sports. Soon enough he’ll just be another sweaty body to throw out on the turf.

“Hey, I’m gonna go congratulate Sap, come with,” Karl says, tugging on George’s arm. He sighs reluctantly but allows himself to be pulled back up to his feet. “Okay, but it better be quick; getting out of the parking lot is gonna be impossible soon enough.”

“I’ll hurry. We’ll be out of here in a jiffy,” Karl promises eagerly. “Q? Bad? You wanna come?”

Quackity shakes his head. “Nah, we’re gonna go grab some Mcdonald’s. Wanna meet up when you’re through?”

Karl looks to George and he nods, slinging his bag over his shoulder. “Sounds like a plan. We’ll be there.”

And with that, Quackity is gone, Bad in tow. Karl gives him a nudge. “Off we go!”

He leads the way through the crowd, easily slipping through the masses. George stays close behind, as to not get lost. Groups congregate on every square inch of the artificial grass, talking loudly over each other. It used to be highly overwhelming, but George is used to it by now (though he normally stays clear of the post-game crowds if at all possible).

While George makes a point to avoid most of the football players, Sapnap, as it turned out, was actually pretty cool. He had properly gotten to know him through Karl this year, and though Sapnap was obnoxious, he was relatively down to earth and fun to be around, (though George still refused to let him have the aux- Sapnap as a person: not half bad. Sapnap’s playlist: still unbearable). They didn’t hang out often, but George enjoyed the times Karl brought him over for games and drinks.

A few of the girls from the cheer team wave at them in passing as they snake their way through the throngs of people. George and Karl offer smiles and waves in return, congratulating their friends on another great performance. Others stop to say hello to Karl- people George hasn’t even seen calling out his name in greeting. How he manages to have a social life on top of practice and studying, George doesn’t know.

Finally, they break through a particularly dense cluster and see the back of a familiar white headband. Sapnap is in mid conversation with a few other football players. When he sees them he stops, a wide grin breaking across his face. “My boys!” He exclaims running toward them.

George and Karl both dodge the hug, teasing that they don’t need anymore sweat on their uniforms.

“Aw c’mon, not even for me? My sweat probably has healing properties or something,” Sapnap says, wiggling his eyebrows.

Karl laughs out loud and George pretends to vomit.

Once they have composed themselves Karl gives his friend a pat on the shoulder. “For real though, you all played fantastic! Looks like we might even stand a chance against Cedar Peak this year.”

Sapnap pretends to tip his hat and puffs out his chest. “Oh you bet your ass we will. And you guys will send their cheer squad running for the hills.”



“Maybe if this one would actually get to practice on time,” George jabs Karl, who giggles and dances away.

“Listen, I need my beauty sleep,” he replies, with a fake pout.

“And I need my team members to quit showing up ten minutes late with a cold brew.”

“Just be glad I get an extra for you, or you’d sleep the whole way through drills.”

George concedes and Karl gives a satisfied chuckle.

“Anyway, enough about Karl’s coffee addiction Sap. Great job out there, for real. I saw that tackle you made in the third quarter. That was clutch.”

Sapnap scoffs, but beams with pride despite himself. “Naw that was nothing. Wouldn’t have made a dent in the old scoreboard if it wasn’t for this guy right here,” He nudges one of the uniformed figures behind him, who stops their discussion and turns around.

Well *shit* .

“Dream was the real star of the show,” Sapnap continues, punching the figure in the shoulder.

Catching onto their conversation now, Dream raises his eyebrows. He looks bashful... *a deep blush rising to his freckled cheekbones.*

George wants to kick himself. This is ridiculous. Obscene. He shakes the memory from his mind, keeping his eyes focused squarely on Sapnap’s headband.

“I just got lucky,” Dream insists with a chuckle, elbowing Sapnap. “You’ve got to stop talking me up. You’re just as good as I am, Sap.”

“It’s not just me man, George and Karl were the ones who brought it up,” He says with a shrug, tilting his head towards them, to George’s mortification.

As if noticing them for the first time, Dream looks up.

His eyes meet George’s. *Startlingly green* . George isn’t sure if he imagines the way Dream’s lip’s part in surprise. He feels like he is falling.

“Oh were they?” He says, eyes still on George. George feels himself burning under his gaze.

His mind screams to retreat. To “*Get out before he recognizes you!*” (*if he hasn’t already*). But there are people watching, and he can’t just dip mid conversation. So he stays, nails digging into his palms..

“Uh no actually,” He isn’t sure where the sudden confidence comes from. “We were just talking about Sapnap’s playing. Not yours.” The comment is unnecessary. Mean. But George feels cornered, put under a microscope. And he’s not above fighting for his way out..

“Ah. I’m sorry, I must have misheard,” Dream replies, seemingly unbothered. He is still studying George intensely.

“Ok maybe *I* was the one swooning over you,” Sapnap concedes. “But I’m sure these fools would have said the same thing.”

Dream ignores him. “George, was it?”

George swallows hard and nods, wanting to disappear.

“I’ve seen you before.”

Shit. Shit shit shit. So he does remember. George’s mind races, desperately trying to come up with an explanation. He was drunk. He barely remembers that night. Does he recall him calling him pretty? No, no, he must have talked to someone else. Different party. He went home before Dream even showed up. Yeah, one of those ought to work.

But what comes out instead is a strangled, “You have?”

Dream nods, tilting his head to one side. “Yeah...” his face lights up. “Oh I know, you’re the cheer captain, aren’t you!”

Thank the lord almighty. A relieved laugh bubbles up from within George, and he rubs the back of his neck. “Right! Yup! That’s me,” he responds, feeling all the anxiety disperse from his tense muscles.

Dream grins. “George,” he says, turning the name over in his mouth. “Man, you were amazing out there.”

George blushes. “It’s nothing, really. I just led some chants and flipped around a bit.”

“No, no! Seriously!” Dream shakes his head vigorously. “I’ve watched you perform before, you’re really good.”

“You’ve watched me?”

“I have.” He knows he’s not imagining the tips of Dream’s ears turning red. “A lot.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Well.” George’s throat feels dry. “Um, thanks.”

The silence stretches on impossibly long, and he can feel Karl’s eyes on him. He suddenly wishes he were anywhere else. Luckily, another player comes and tackles Dream playfully, messing with his hair. “Way to go Bennett,” the man yells, and Dream cackles from the ground, trying to push him off.

George internally sighs in relief.

“We should get going,” he says, linking his arm through Karl’s and starting to back up.

Sapnap gives them a thumbs up. “Alrighty. Thanks for stopping to say hi!”

“See you tomorrow Sap,” Karl replies with a wave. “Great game!”

Right as they are about to disappear into the safety of the crowd, another voice rings out, and George winces.

“Hey, uh, nice to meet you George! And Karl!” Dream calls after them.

“You too,” Karl chirps back, but George tugs him forward, eyes fixed firmly ahead. Once they are safely out of earshot he adds, “C’mon George, there was no need to be rude.”

“I wasn’t being rude.”

“You were. You ignored him.”

“We were in a hurry.”

Karl huffs. “He seemed pretty nice. You didn’t need to get all weird and defensive. Dream was just being friendly.”

“Friendly my ass.” George grits his teeth. “He was trying to mess with me.”

Karl purses his lips, but doesn’t prod him further until they are in the parking lot. “It looked like something else entirely to me,” he mumbles, as they reach the blue sedan.

“What was that?”

Karl rolls his eyes, swinging his duffel around to wack George in the back with a loud sigh.

“Nothing Gogy. Just quit whining and get me some nuggets.”

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

Quackity's eyebrows shoot upward, and he lets out an amused "Uh oh," watching closely for George's reaction. George sinks down, using the back of the couch as cover.

He is going to kill Karl. He's going to poison his gatorade tomorrow at practice with zero remorse. It's decided.

"Hi Sapnap! Dream!" Karl exclaims with a smile, welcoming his guests inside.

### Chapter Notes

Hello folks! This was originally going to be a bit longer, but I decided to get this chapter out sooner and save the other fun stuff for next chapter. Hope you enjoy some pop off crew movie night fluff! And as usual, feedback is always appreciated!

Just as George predicted, Dream's miraculous, game-saving catch is all but forgotten in the space of two weeks. Life at Northview returns to normal, and George goes back to ignoring Dream's existence. Well, trying to at least. There is one unavoidable, glaring problem.

He is at Karl's apartment for a relaxing night of pizza and movie-binging when there is an unexpected knock at the door. George glances up from the TV screen where he is flipping through Netflix.

"Is that Bad? I thought he wasn't coming?" He says, hovering over the recommended category.

"Maybe he finished that essay early," Quackity responds absentmindedly, through a mouthful of pizza.

A muffled sound of surprise is heard from the kitchen and Karl sprints in, sliding across the tile in socked feet. He looks frazzled.

"Already?" He protests, and George raises an eyebrow.

"You expecting someone?"

Karl's expression resembles a deer caught in the headlights as he meets George's eyes. "Ah. Yes. Well, here's the thing..." he sputters.

Quackity sits up from his place on the couch, and George turns around fully. "Karl..."

"You have to promise not to get mad."

Another knock.

“Ooo Karl you’re in trouble...” Quackity says and George throws a pillow at him.

“You bet your ass he is. Now Karl, answer the question.”

Karl looks frantically at the door.

George narrows his eyes. “What did you do?”

“Look, I’ll make it up to you later guys, I promise, It was last minute and-”

“Just answer the damn door,” George says with an exasperated huff.

“Okay, okay!” Karl adjusts the collar of his sweater and takes in a calming breath before opening the door.

Two figures stand in the doorway.

Quackity’s eyebrows shoot upward, and he lets out an amused “Uh oh,” watching closely for George’s reaction. George sinks down, using the back of the couch as cover.

He is going to kill Karl. He’s going to poison his gatorade tomorrow at practice with zero remorse. It’s decided.

“Hi Sapnap! Dream!” Karl exclaims with a smile, welcoming his guests inside.

George whirls back around to face the screen, palms sweaty as he fumbles with the remote. Anger and panic swirl in his stomach. He scans the titles, not retaining any of them.

His phone buzzes beside him, a text from Quackity appearing at the top.

*“HAHAHAHA HE INVITED YOUR FAVORITE PERSON-”*

The text cuts off. George ignores it with a subtle shake of his head.

“Are you sure it’s okay we crash your movie night?” Dream asks.

*No.*

“Of course! We’re glad to have you, right guys?” Karl replies, a desperate emphasis on the last two words only George would be able to detect.

“Right,” Quackity says smugly, resting innocently on the top of the couch, peeking over the top. George can hear the grin in his voice.

“How about the latest James Bond movie Quackity?” George calls loudly tilting his head towards his friend. It’s petty, and he doesn’t care.

Quackity winces, “Damn dude, I’m right here, no need to shout,” he mutters, then as an afterthought, “You don’t even like action movies George.”

“Well this one is just looking especially good tonight.”

If the unwanted guests notice George dodge Karl’s question, they don’t say so.

Karl grumbles something under his breath, but quickly corrects his demeanor.

*They’ll probably steal the pizza too.*

“Are you guys hungry?”

*Called it.*

“Nah, we already ate,” Sapnap says, draping his jacket over a nearby chair. “Thanks for the offer though.”

Another buzz from his phone, this one a text from Karl.

*“Just behave yourself for one night George, geez! I know-”*

George flips the phone over, leaving the message unread. But in his heart of hearts, he knows Karl is right. It’s just one night. Karl has done favors for him a million times over, and rarely asks for help of his own. George is being dramatic. Surely, *surely* he can ignore Dream for one night.

Sapnap flops onto the couch with a contented sigh, and Quackity passes him the bowl of popcorn. “So what are we watchin Gogmeister?” He takes a handful.

Dream continues to stand awkwardly in the doorway, varsity jacket slung over his arm. George secretly hopes he ruins it with popcorn grease.

“I was thinking Harry Potter?” He replies, holding a hand out for the bowl. Instead, Sapnap tosses a single kernel at his face, with a hasty “Catch.”

“You always say Harry Potter,” Karl teases, coming to sit between Sapnap and Quackity with a paper plate full of pizza.

George shrugs. “It’s a cinematic masterpiece.”

Quackity scoffs. “No it’s not.”

“Ok it’s not. But it still never gets old,” George agrees, lunging for a handful of popcorn.

Dream perks up, finally leaving the safety of the front entryway. “Which one is your favorite?” He asks, eyes bright.

The comment catches George off guard. “Prisoner of Azkaban,” he fumbles.

“I’m impartial to Goblet of Fire,” Dream replies with a smile that makes the corners of his eyes crinkle. “Though Azkaban is probably my second choice- you have good taste.” He reaches the couch and seems to lose his confidence again, shifting his weight nervously.

“Have you read the books?” George says, unable to hide the challenge in his voice.

Dream laughs, not catching on to the thinly veiled disdain. “Too many times to count,” he says. “I left my copies at home with my sister when I moved out though. She made a special request even though half of them are missing the covers at this point.”

George is at a loss. He stutters out an, “Oh,” feeling vaguely guilty. Quackity lets out something that sounds like a snort, but after a sharp glare from George he covers it with a cough.

“Well I don’t care what we watch,” Sapnap says, leaning back and snuggling into the old leather. “You guys can just pick something.” He tilts his head back to look at Dream behind him. “Uh... are you gonna sit?”

Dream turns pink and swallows hard. “Oh! Yeah. I just... yeah.” He eyes the remaining space on

the couch next to George.

George mentally kicks himself for not claiming a spot in the middle sooner. Dream catches his eye by accident and looks away, twisting his jacket in his hands.

“I promise George doesn’t bite,” Karl adds, though he doesn’t sound so certain.

“I know, I know,” Dream replies with a chuckle, and shuffles into the living room. He sits wedged against the armrest on the far end of the cushion- the furthest end from George. The varsity jacket sits in a rolled up ball on his lap.

George swallows the strange feeling of disappointment that settles into his stomach. It’s ridiculous. He should be glad for the awkward distance between them. It makes ignoring Dream and enjoying the movie easier. If he turns his head just so, it’s like he isn’t even there.

Karl reaches across Sappnap to steal the remote. After a quick search, he flicks on the movie. George adjusts so his knees and head are subtly turned away from Dream and wraps his arms around a nearby pillow.

*“Just pretend he isn’t there,”* he thinks to himself, blinking hard. *“It’s just a normal movie night.”*

Shockingly, the mental affirmations do not help in the slightest. As *The Prisoner of Azkaban* rolls into its opening scene, George cannot deny the fact that he is hyper aware of Dream’s presence inches away from him. He feels hot all over, hesitant to move or even breathe in fear he’ll accidentally brush against an arm or a leg or an elbow. Dream stays equally still, head frozen stiffly toward the screen. They sit like statues, all tense muscles and locked jaws. But as the movie continues, George’s neck and shoulders begin to ache, and he ever so slowly allows himself to relax into the cushions. Dream follows suit, and George thinks he hears him let out a barely audible sigh of relief under his breath.

Twenty minutes in, things take a turn for the worst and they quote the same line simultaneously. George stops, mid word. Dream’s fake British accent overlapping with his is absolutely dreadful, and before he can stop it, a soft giggle bubbles up in his chest. He claps a hand over his mouth, glancing over at Dream, who already matches his surprised expression. Dream quickly looks back towards the screen with a pleased, shy smile, shaking his head in amusement.

“That was some weird hive mind shit,” Sappnap remarks, throwing a piece of popcorn at each of them. George catches it and goes to throw it back, stopping midway when he sees Sappnap’s arm wrapped around Karl. A smirk finds his way to his face and he raises an eyebrow. Karl meets his eyes and raises his own eyebrows as if to say, “Not a word.” George shrugs and completes the throw.

He has had his suspicions about Karl’s crush for a while now, but never explicitly gotten to the bottom of it. George brought up the hidden glances and subtle blushes once, but Karl merely shouted nonsense over him until he stopped the pestering- flushing bright red from head to toe.

George determines to ask him about it later, but for now he leans back into his seat, pretending he hasn’t seen a thing.

Another thirty minutes pass, and George allows himself to be sucked into the movie, smiling at all the familiar plot twists and funny lines. He doesn’t even notice Dream going for the popcorn bowl in between them at the same time as he is, both hands reaching out absentmindedly.

Dream’s hand brushes against his, and he pulls back as if he’s been shocked, face red. A hasty

apology bubbles up in his throat as he looks back up, but he stops short at Dream's cheeky grin.

"If you wanted to hold my hand, you could have just asked," the man says innocently, words laced with honey.

George freezes.

And then he does something stupid. In retrospect, it was entirely unnecessary. A complete overreaction. A tricky, mean-spirited escape route to ward off one offhand comment that likely held no real meaning behind it.

George dumps the entire popcorn bucket on Dream's head.

The low chatter that had previously filled the room ceases, leaving only the dull sounds of the TV.

"Uh..." Sapnap remarks. Karl lets out something resembling a horrified squeak.

George looks at Dream, popcorn nestled in the curls of his hair, forming a pile in the folds of the letterman jacket on his lap. George waits, feeling sick. Waits for Dream to tell him off, or raise his eyes in a nasty look, or shove the rest of the popcorn bowl at his chest and storm off. But he doesn't.

Dream *laughs* .

The sound is loud and hearty, his breath catching and wheezing at some points. His whole body shakes with mirth. As he does, little popcorn kernels fall from his hair and shoulders onto the couch and tumble to the floor. George is left speechless.

"I deserved that," Dream finally says and George thinks to himself, "*No, you really didn't*," with wide, bewildered eyes.

Something inside him feels strangely giddy, and he nearly bursts into his own peals of laughter.

"I am so sorry, Dream," Karl sputters, before George can respond. The giddiness is replaced with guilt. *Behave for one night* . Ugh. He hadn't even managed that.

"It's quite alright," Dream replies, picking up one piece of popcorn off of his pant leg and popping it into his mouth. "Still tastes good." He raises his eyebrows at George with an amused glint in his eye. George blinks and snaps his mouth shut.

"It was probably Dream's fault, he's such a klutz," Sapnap chuckles, unfazed.

"It's true, I am," Dream replies earnestly, not tearing his gaze away from George's. George feels his face grow hot.

Someone turns up the movie and their friends go back to watching as Remus Lupin turns into a werewolf.

George only snaps out of it when Dream begins to clean up the mess, reaching down to scoop handfuls of popcorn into the bowl. Wordlessly, George joins him. This time, he takes extra care that their hands stay a safe distance apart.

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The door clicks shut, leaving the apartment silent for a long moment. George flops back on the couch, lying across it, legs resting on the armrest. He pulls a spare blanket over his head and



prepares for an onslaught.

“What the hell was that?”

There it is.

“Uh... I’ve got to go to the bathroom,” Quackity claims, scooting around the corner, but Karl grabs him by the shirt collar.

“Nope, not so fast.”

Quackity groans. “Why me? I’m innocent here! What did I do?”

Karl huffs, letting go and moving into the living room. He tears the blanket off of George, who smiles up at him sweetly.

“Yes Karl?”

Karl rolls up the blanket and chucks it back into his face. “You are impossible.”

“Was I not the most welcoming host?”

“You dumped a bowl of popcorn on his head.”

George shrugs. “It was my way of saying ‘I enjoy your company very much- please come again.’”

“I cannot believe you,” Karl replies, throwing his hands into the air.

George rests the blanket back over his eyes, tucking his hands behind his head. “I don’t know why you’re pointing fingers. How do you know Dream’s hand didn’t just slip?”

“George, can’t you just be serious for five seconds?! You can’t keep pulling this shit!”

George recognizes the tense lilt in Karl’s tone. He’s passed exasperation now. Time to back off.

“I’m sorry Karl,” he admits, in a low sing-song voice, and Karl seems satisfied. “... But he started it.”

Karl groans and Quackity returns to the couch, sitting on George’s chest and knocking the wind out of him.

“Quit being a little bitch,” Quackity remarks, reaching under the blanket to pinch him.

“I’m not!”

Karl joins them, grabbing a pillow and whacking George with it directly in the face. George tries to block the blows, but Quackity holds him down.

“Man Q, can you even imagine having a nice evening with some nice new friends with this nimrod around?” Karl says sarcastically, bringing the pillow down again, muffling George’s protests.

Quackity leans back against the couch, George still squirming under him. “I really can’t Karl. George just insists on celebrating nimrod November year round.”

“I do concur.”

“I can’t breathe Quackity!” George gasps, slapping at him.

“Should have thought of that before you ruined Karl’s special moment,” he flutters his eyes at Karl, who turns pink and switches the pillow attacks to Quackity.

“Shut up!”

Quackity snickers and rolls off George. “For real though Karl, what’s the deal with that?”

Karl sighs and leans against the back of the couch, hugging the pillow to his chest. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” George repeats, looking up at him. Karl’s eyes flit to George’s, then back again.

“It’s complicated.”

George splays his hands out above him, opening and closing his fingers. “Is it complicated? Or are you overcomplicating things?”

“Both.”

George smiles softly, not surprised by the response. He hums, and Karl buries his face in the pillow.

“It seemed to be going pretty alright during the movie to me,” Quackity says with a shrug, patting Karl on the head in passing.

Karl glances up at them, then flops back down with a groan. “You don’t know that.”

George laughs. “We’re not blind Karl.”

“Even if you are,” Quackity adds. “Just accept the boy was trying to make a move.”

“What if he wasn’t! What if it was just an... I don’t know... friend thing?”

George lifts a socked foot, poking Karl with his toes. Karl swats at it and George giggles. “Look, you don’t see me snuggling up to you during a movie.”

“Yeah cause you’re too busy snuggling up to Dream.”

George lets out an offended gasp. “I was not, dipshit!”

“You sure as hell were making googly eyes,” Quackity replies and George scoffs. “Not true.”

Karl begins to clean up the room, gathering leftover paper plates and blankets. “I don’t know Gogy,” he says. “I really think he likes you.”

George rolls over. “Yeah right.”

Karl pauses with a light laugh. “I’m serious.”

“The day *Dream Bennett* falls for me is the day Quackity aces a Calc test,” he retorts with a snort.

“Well I better start studying,” Quackity says with a sly smile.

George blushes. “I *meant*, that it will never happen.”

“We know what you meant, George,” Quackity and Karl chorus back, rolling their eyes.

George huffs and Karl offers a smile. “Still think he likes you. And I think that even though you’ll never admit it, you like him. At least a little.”

“I want to replace his football uniform with a miniskirt and pom poms and send him out on the field,” George spits back through gritted teeth.

Quackity wiggles his eyebrows. “You’re into guys in skirts huh?”

“Wha-”

“Hey, hey, no judgement here.”

George screams into a pillow and rolls over miserably.

“I don’t know why I even try with you two.”

## Chapter 3

### Chapter Summary

“Keep talking... please,” George says, rubbing a thumb in lazy circles on his shoulder.

“About what?” Dream responds calmly, and George shrugs, though he knows Dream can’t see it.

“Anything.”

So Dream does.

### Chapter Notes

I'm back with a whopping 9k chapter for y'all! In retrospect, this probably should have been split into two parts, but oh well. Thank you so much for your support so far, it means a lot. I've got some big plans for this fic so make sure to stick around! As usual, feedback is always appreciated. Enjoy!

Puffy narrows her eyes at George across her desk. She has her arms folded, foot tapping steadily against the floor. Cheer practice was over twenty minutes ago, and George desperately wants to go home and take a nap. But instead he finds himself in Puffy’s office awaiting what is sure to be a colorful response. The sheep bobblehead on Puffy’s desk quivers, its pirate hat dipping up and down atop its fleecy white head.

She steepled her fingers. “Ok George, so let me get this straight: we can’t do your routine next week because...”

George has already prepared this response several times over. “Because it’s not ready.”

Puffy raises an eyebrow, unimpressed. “It’s not ready.”

“Nope.”

“... Even though you’ve had it perfected for weeks.”

George leans back in his chair. “Well I wouldn’t say that-”

Puffy lets out an exasperated sigh, resting her hands on the desk. “George...”

George avoids her eyes, picking at a loose piece of string at the end of his hoodie.

Puffy’s expression softens. “Look, if I believed you actually needed more time, I wouldn’t pressure you. You know I wouldn’t.” She waits for George to meet her eyes. “But I know you can do this. I know you’ve worked your ass off for it. And I *also* know you have a tendency to downplay and doubt your abilities. I don’t put up with that on my team. I’m not just going to stand aside and let

you sell yourself short. Is that clear captain?"

George's lips turn up just slightly. "Yes. I understand," he replies, defeated. He should have known better than to go head to head with Puffy. She is a force of nature, impossible to deter when she sets her mind to something. It's what makes her such a great coach.

Puffy is the reason George stuck with cheer in the first place. She had noticed him as a shy sophomore, sneaking into practices with his head down, trying desperately to blend in.

"Why are you here?" She asked one day, pulling him aside in the hallway outside the gym.

It caught George entirely off guard, leaving him stuttering with his mouth wide open- eyes darting for an escape route. "Pardon?"

To his further surprise, Puffy grabbed him by both sides of his face. She scanned his expression intensely. "I can't seem to figure you out George Vincent. You spend every spare moment in that gym. You show up to practice ten minutes early, and push yourself until you're ready to pass out. You waltzed in here last year with a full ride scholarship and an inch thick folder of recommendations. So what's holding you back?"

George swallowed hard. He searched his brain desperately for a response. What was holding him back?

"I mean... my front handsprings could use a little work," he admitted absentmindedly, mind still racing.

Puffy laughed at that, dropping her hands to George's shoulders. "No."

"No?"

She shook her head, choosing her next words carefully. "You... don't think you deserve to be here, do you George?"

It was like having the wind knocked out of him. The comment might have seemed confrontational, but Puffy's eyes were honest, searching. It was as if she saw right through him.

George paused, then responded in a small voice, "Oh. Well I...um..." he steadied himself. "No. I don't."

Puffy nodded, her eyebrows furrowed. "I thought so."

George deflated a little. So she was disappointed in him. He didn't blame her; it hurt, but he could move past it. He never expected to gain the approval of the coaches in the first place.

But Puffy looked at him with a strange glint in her eye, sending a flurry of nervous butterflies into his stomach. Finally, she continued.

"Alright George. I'm going to start training you to be a team captain."

*A what?*

George gaped at her. There must be some mistake. There were hordes of upperclassmen waiting for their chance to move up the ranks and take over as cheer captain, this year and the next. They were all more qualified in every way. Hell, George barely said a word at cheer unless they were on the field!

“Me? Cheer captain?” The words felt foreign in his mouth. “Coach... I think you’ve got the wrong guy.”

“Nope, you are definitely the one for the job,” she said confidently.

George took a few steps back. “Why me? Surely there are better candidates, coach. I’ve only been here two years, and I hardly know what I’m doing.”

Puffy folded her arms. “Because I believe you can do it, George. And I’m not going to leave you be until you see *why* I believe it.”

The words struck a chord somewhere deep inside. She believed. She believed in *him* .

“I won’t have you take over any time this year of course,” Puffy continued in an easy tone, as if it was the most normal conversation in the world. “But I want you to start preparing. And.. I want you to start holding yourself to a higher standard.” She smiled brightly. “Because I’m gonna need ya.”

George nodded as if in a trance, humming “*okay*, ” and a “*yes*, ” at the appropriate times. He barely processed the words coming out. Puffy paused and looked down at her watch.

“Shoot! I’ve got to run, sorry. Let’s talk again tomorrow before practice, okay?”

“Sure. I’ll be there,” George answered, still in disbelief.

Puffy patted him on the shoulder and started backpedalling down the hallway. “Great! Looking forward to it.” Then, with a pointed finger, “Oh, and George? No more holding back, okay?”

He waved, unable to keep the bewildered grin from his face. “Okay.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” Puffy gave him one last thumbs up, and disappeared around the corner.

George walked home that day in a daze, with a little extra skip in his step.

“George?”

He snaps back to the present, where Puffy is waiting expectantly. “So the Friday game next week? Halftime?” She asks, head tilted slightly.

*No holding back.*

George takes in a deep breath, settling his nerves. He meets Puffy’s eyes.

“Okay. We’ll do it. We’ll do my routine.”

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“Hey idiot, stop staring.” George says, knocking Karl on the head, pulling him out of his not-so-subtle trance.

Karl jumps. “I wasn’t staring!” He exclaims.

George grins, taking a swig of water. “You most definitely were. Unless you’re planning to join the football team and are just taking notes on their plays.”

Karl scoffs. “You’re hilarious. Truly.”

“Finally some recognition.”

“Oh shut up.”

George plops down on the ground, stretching his legs out in front of him. Karl follows suit with a tired sigh. Out on the field, a whistle blows and the players switch out as Schlatt runs them through a new drill. George watches lazily, picking out Dream, then Sapnap in the crowd. They are on the sidelines, having just finished running the cone obstacle course. Dream pulls his helmet off, running a hand through his hair. Sapnap says something and he laughs.

He feels Karl’s eyes on him and hastily extends himself forward to touch his toes, nose almost brushing his knees, adequately hiding any blush that might have been there.

*Focus.*

“So are you gonna ask him out, or what?” George asks slyly, diverting his attention back to the problem at hand.

Karl groans. “Georgeeee.”

“Karl!!!,” he choruses back cheekily.

They are silent for a few moments, stretching one leg at a time. Finally, Karl responds. He lets out a long breath. “I’m not gonna ask him out.”

George gives him an incredulous look. “Why not??”

Karl watches the field for a while. Someone calls for the next group, and Sapnap runs out, Dream slapping him on the back as he does so. George can see the fondness in Karl’s eyes as he tears his gaze away, going back to focusing on the ground.

“I’m scared,” he says, voice barely audible.

George feels a pang of sympathy. “Of what?”

Karl shrugs. “Of rejection. That it will ruin our friendship and make things weird.” He chuckles. “...That he’ll accept. Then what?”

George scoots closer, nudging Karl’s shoulder gently. “Then... you go on a date.”

Karl smiles shyly in response, not looking up.

“Annnd... you hold his hand.”

Karl shoves him and rolls his eyes. “Stop.”

“And you watch his games, and go to movies together, and make him laugh-”

“George you’re so dumb.”

“And he’ll look into your eyes and say, ‘Karl you are the absolute greatest man alive and I am so in love with you, and I think I would like to kiss you, perhaps,’” George finishes, leaning over and making kissy faces at his friend. Karl pretends to gag and pushes his face away.

George giggles, flopping onto his back, arms outstretched. He sighs contently. "You worry too much Karl. It's going to be fine."

Karl curls up, tucking his chin on his knees, eyes trained on Sapnap. "You're right," he affirms, convincing himself. "I'm sure I'm just overthinking this."

George follows his gaze, and is surprised to find Dream's eyes on him. They flit away in an instant, and George wonders if he imagined it.

*"I still think he likes you..."*

No. Surely not.

"Let's go Karl," George says, grabbing his bag. Karl protests, and George heaves him off the ground. "C'mon lazy-bones."

They amble towards the parking lot, Karl grumbling about stopping somewhere for food.

George pretends he doesn't notice Dream watching him leave.

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"George?" Bad's voice rings out.

George looks up in surprise to find Bad and Skeppy waiting, pencils suspended over their scratch paper. Quackity is twirling his in between his fingers distractedly.

"Sorry what was that? I must have spaced out," George replies, focusing back on the math textbook in front of him.

"No worries," Bad responds cheerfully. "We were just asking if you're ready for us to check your answers."

"Remind me why you numbskulls are qualified to teach us?" Quackity says disinterestedly. He attempts to hold the pencil up with his upper lip by scrunching his mouth and nose together. Skeppy snatches the pencil right as it starts to balance properly, setting it back down on the desk, ignoring Quackity's angry "*Hey!*"

"Like we said, *Quackity*," Skeppy continues, giving their friend a dirty look. "Professor Collins requires twenty hours of tutoring this semester in our Algebra III class. Both of you were available, and suck at math."

Quackity grumbles something under his breath.

"Ok, I do not *suck* at math," George protests. "I've just gotten behind this unit."

"Yeah me too," Quackity adds.

George pokes him. "No you definitely just suck at math."

"Oh c'mon!" Quackity yells.

George snickers, and passes Bad his homework assignment to look over. Bad scans the page carefully. "How's the team looking, George?" He asks, still focused on the paper in his hand.

George rests his chin in his hand. "Good, I think. Everyone this year has been really committed.



It's refreshing. Really, it's just a matter of keeping up with their enthusiasm."

Skeppy reads the answers over Bad's shoulder as he grades them. "You think you'll have a chance at taking state this year?"

George shrugs. "Maybe. Puffy and Will think we have it in the bag, but I'm trying not to get my hopes up. We're still a relatively new program, so who knows."

"How long until competition?"

"Let's see..." he counts off the months on his fingers. It's October now, and competition is in January. "Around four." He blows out a puff of air. "Damn, that's coming up fast."

"I'm sure you guys will be fine," Quackity says, ripping one corner of his assignment into smaller and smaller bits of paper, letting them collect in a pile on the table. "I can't wait to watch you kick Cedar Peak's ass."

"Language," Bad mumbles, circling a problem. "And quit making a mess, Quackity."

Quackity takes the pieces of paper in between his fingers and leans over to sprinkle them on Bad's head. Bad and Skeppy exclaim simultaneously, trying to knock his arm away. Quackity cackles and darts away.

Bad hands George's paper back with three questions marked in red, then moves on to Quackity's. George puts the assignment away, grabbing his backpack.

"Wait, where are you going?" Skeppy asks as George crams random folders and calculators into the bag.

"Dinner with my parents, remember?"

Skeppy hums. "Oh right. Well, see you George. Shoot us a text if you get stuck fixing the homework later."

George nods. "Will do, thanks again you guys. See ya Bad, Quackity."

"Bye George, have fun at home," Bad says with a wave, and Quackity groans.

"Nooo George, you can't leave me to third-wheel these two! What if they start having sex under the table?"

Skeppy simultaneously punches Quackity in the arm as Bad screeches another "Language!"

"Sorry Q, I guess you'll just have to finish the homework in the bathroom," George teases, heading out the door. Quackity lets out an exaggerated wail as the door shuts behind him.

It's only a two hour drive to his parents' house in Tampa, but it feels much longer. The drive leaves him plenty of time to think, and worry, and work himself up about the dinner. He isn't sure why visiting the Vincents always makes him so nervous. The monthly dinners usually result in a very nice evening, and he likes catching up with his siblings. But there's also the inevitability that they will ask about school, cheer, or his dating life. All topics he'd rather avoid at the dinner table.

They've only been living in Florida for a few years, and it still feels odd to call it home. Though he enjoys the warm weather here, and the boisterous people, he still misses rainy Brighton most days.

When George arrives, most of his siblings are already present, bustling around the kitchen and

sprawling across the couch. His mother, Alice, barely notices George walk in.

“Oh George, dear, welcome!” She says, running by in a pair of oven mitts. She gives him a quick kiss on the cheek in passing. “Come help me with this roast, will you?”

“Sure, mum,” he replies, hanging up his coat.

Taking a head count, George spots his oldest brother Miles in the living room, working on his laptop. Their other brother, Camron, has yet to show up. As George passes by the living room, a pair of tiny arms wrap around his leg, and he looks down to find a curly haired boy latched on, his oldest sister Jane in tow.

“Uncle Gogy!” The child shrieks, jumping up and down.

“Calm down Dennis, give him a second to breathe,” Jane says, catching her breath after having chased her son up the stairs. “Hi George,” she adds as an afterthought, with a tired smile.

George smiles back and lifts Dennis onto his hip. “Hey buddy. Want to give your mum a break and come help me with dinner?”

The four year old claps and bobs his head rapidly, squirming in George’s arms. “Yes, yes!”

Jane, mouths a thank you and goes back to the basement, likely to corral her other two children.

The kitchen is warm, full of the smells of slow cooked meat and vegetables. George inhales deeply and sighs. The dining table is already set with matching plates and silverware, a napkin folded neatly at each seat.

“Oh good,” Alice says, pushing him over to one of the bowls on the counter. “Finally someone who knows what they’re doing. You take care of the potatoes.”

“What about me Nana?” Dennis asks.

George’s mother looks around, exasperated. “Just um... go grab me some more napkins, how about that.”

Dennis putters off to complete the task as George starts peeling the potatoes.

“Where’s dad and Camron?” He asks.

Alice stirs the gravy on the stove. “Camron is picking up his girlfriend, and your father is probably still asleep in his room.”

“Camron has a girlfriend?” George raises an eyebrow.

His mother sighs in exasperation. “Apparently. I wasn’t aware until this morning,” she chuckles.

“Why am I not surprised.” George smirks.

Alice sighs, pushing away a few stray strands of hair with her forearm. “Oh well,” she says. “Maybe a girlfriend will force Camron to buckle down and get serious about something.”

“Maybe,” George replies, then with a chuckle adds, “But I doubt it.”

Alice laughs.

Camron shows up thirty minutes later, a pretty blonde thing adorned in a black cocktail dress on his arm. George fights the urge to roll his eyes.

“Hello family!”

Forty minutes later they are sitting around the too-small dinner table, talking over the whines and screeches and gurgles of Jane’s children.

“Well then,” Alice huffs, bringing the last dish to the table and stepping back to admire her work. “Let’s eat, shall we?”

Camron’s girlfriend introduces herself as “Betty.” *Betty* doesn’t stop talking the entire meal.

Peachy.

She insists upon commenting on every conversation that she picks up on, speaking over everyone in a shrill voice. Each time she does, Camron nods along to each statement with wide, admiring eyes. George avoids the problem preemptively by not saying a word, making sure his mouth is full every time someone even looks his way. He makes a mental note to beg his brother to leave her home next time.

George’s mother interrupts Betty mid-sentence as she babbles about her skin-care routine to anyone who will listen.

“So, Miles honey!” Alice calls. “Why don’t you tell everyone about that new promotion you got at work!”

Miles shifts in his seat and tries to look engaged. “Oh, uh sure. I... got a promotion.”

Alice tilts her head forward expectantly. “And?”

“The regional manager is retiring, so I’m taking over his job. It’ll be better pay, so that’s nice.”

The Vincent family waits for further elaboration that doesn’t come. George’s mother purses her lips. “Right then. That’s... great dear.”

George feels bad for her. Alice Vincent is undoubtedly the very thing that holds their family together, working tirelessly to keep them fed, clothed, and happy. It’s left her somewhat frazzled, constantly tired, and quite often disappointed. When you have such high hopes for the people you love, George supposes it makes sense that you’re always getting let down.

“George,” his father’s strong voice rings out above the rest, making all of the family members’ heads turn.

George swallows a spoonful of peas, feeling his palms grow sweaty. “Yes?” He tries not to sound nervous.

Joseph Vincent is a good man, but a terribly imposing one. George wouldn’t go as far as to say he feared him, but ever since he was a boy he and his siblings had a clear understanding that when father speaks, you listen.

Joseph continues cutting his roast. Even Betty settles down momentarily. George waits.

“How’s school?” His father starts, taking a bite of meat.

George shifts in his seat. “It’s going well. I’ve gotten good marks this semester, and I’ve made

some good friends.” He responds, the words automatic and familiar.

“Studying hard?”

George nods. “Yes. I just came from a tutoring session actually.”

Joseph chews slowly, humming in approval. For a long moment, George thinks he might be off the hook.

“Are you still doing that cheerleading thing?” He asks, dark eyes flitting up to meet George’s.

*There it is.*

Across from him, Miles plays with his food distractedly, and Jane grabs a napkin to wipe Dennis’ mouth. All is silent.

“I am.”

His mother gives him a vaguely pitying look. George hates that look more than anything.

His father has never approved of his decision to pursue cheer. They have had countless arguments over the dinner table... on car rides... in George’s bedroom late at night.

*“I don’t know how you expect me to support you dancing around in a skirt and pom poms for the rest of your life when you are going to need to support yourself on your own soon!”*

*“George, when are you going to stop wasting your time with that and pick a real career?”*

*“I don’t want to discourage what you love, but I worry how far that passion alone will be able to take you.”*

*“It’s only because I care about you, son. I worry. I can’t help but feel that you are holding yourself back from greater things.”*

An image of Puffy, staring at him with those bright eyes of hers conjures up in his mind.

*“What’s holding you back?”*

He knows.

George steels himself. “I am,” he repeats. “Actually, I’m glad you brought that up. There’s something I wanted to ask you all.”

Jane pauses curiously, and Camron stops eating, mid bite. His father says nothing.

George forges ahead. “I um... well, we’re going to be performing a routine I came up with at the football game next Friday.”

He attempts to calm his shaky breaths, continuing.

“It’s kind of a big deal. I’ve been putting it together for like a month.” George plays with his fingers under the table, nervous energy coursing through him. “And I was wondering if you all would maybe want to be there?”

The words come out less confident than he had intended, but George feels a freeing sense of pride settle inside him nonetheless. He’s through with walking on eggshells around them. If his family is

upset, so be it.

“I’ve got to take Dennis in for that MRI on Friday,” Jane says, breaking the silence. “I’m sorry George. If I could be there I would. I’m sure you’ll do great.”

She sounds genuinely regretful, but it still stings just a little. He isn’t sure what he expected. Of course there would be some conflicts with such late notice.

“I don’t know George, I’m not sure if I can get work off,” Miles says reluctantly.

“Will you try?” George pushes.

Miles pauses. “Yeah. Yeah, I’ll try.”

“I know I’d love to go!” Betty exclaims, grabbing Camron’s arm excitedly. “I used to do cheer in high school, and I adored it!” Camron seems surprised at the outburst but smiles, patting her hand. “Count us in, I guess,” he says with a shrug, and George mentally apologizes to Betty for every negative thought he had conceived about her earlier. He feels exhilarated. All that’s left is...

“Mum? Dad?” He asks, biting his lip.

Alice turns to her husband, waiting for his response.

Joseph considers George, rubbing his jaw. They sit with baited breath.

“We’ll be there, son.” his father says finally, and George’s heart soars.

“Okay. Okay great! I really appreciate it- all of you. Thank you,” he stammers breathlessly, unable to hide the growing smile on his face.

Finally, *finally* ... they will be able to see. See all the sweat and tears he has put into this team. See why he is willing to risk the approval of his entire family for a couple hours on that field each week.

George begins to eagerly scoop up another serving of mashed potatoes. He looks up at the girl across the table, his voice bright and earnest. “So Betty, you said you did cheer? I’d love to hear what that was like!”

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The football game arrives seemingly overnight. One second George had been calling Karl on the drive home from his parents Sunday, the next he’s leading warm up stretches behind the stands as fans slowly filter in.

“Alright, we’ll call it there guys. Make sure you stay warm and stay hydrated,” George calls as the cheer team begins to cross back out to the field. People offer the occasional “Will do!” and “Thanks George,” in passing as they collect their gear. Karl comes to a stop beside him, resting his chin on George’s shoulder.

“Is your family here yet?” He asks, inclining his head towards the metal stands above them.

George feels his stomach twist nervously. “I don’t think so. They said they were running a little late.”

Karl nods, and rocks from foot to foot, watching the crowd with a faraway expression. He puffs out his cheeks, then lets the air out. “Have you uh... seen Sapnap around?” He asks, trying to sound

nonchalant.

George gives him a side-eye. “Why do you ask?” He bumps his shoulder into Karl’s, smirking.

Karl rolls his eyes. “I just thought I’d wish him good luck before the game. Nothing fancy.”

“Right, right. Of course,” George replies with feigned seriousness.

“George leave me aloneeee...” Karl whines and George laughs, poking his sides.

“Okay, okay,” he concedes, backing off with his hands in the air. “I think I saw him over by the locker room. That’s probably your best bet.”

Karl slings his bag over one shoulder. “*Thank you*,” he says in amused exasperation, saluting. “I’ll come catch up with you later. Wish me luck!”

George salutes back. “Good luck! Go win his heart!”

Karl blushes and groans, waving George off as he heads towards the other side of the field. George laughs quietly to himself and trails after him, aiming to find Puffy and run through the schedule with her one last time. He weaves through the crowd, ducking through throngs of students and parents finding their seats. Eventually, George steps onto the bleachers, hoping the higher vantage point will help him find his coach. The metal bar is cold beneath his hands, and he leans against it, squinting at the empty field and track. The sun is just starting to set, casting long shadows across the field. Not seeing Puffy, George turns on heel to go back down the stairs and... promptly runs headfirst into a stranger. The man lets out a surprised “*Mmph!*” stumbling backward.

“I’m so sorry!” George exclaims, but the words die in his throat as he looks up to see a pair of familiar green eyes.

“Why hello there,” Dream says, once he’s caught his breath, amusement dancing in his face. “I apologize, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

George is at a loss for words, frozen in place as people push past them. “Hi,” he finally manages, cringing at how awkward he sounds.

Dream’s smile brightens. “Hi,” He repeats. “Can you help me with something?”

George nods before he can think twice, brain running a mile a minute.

“Cool. Uh- do you think you could help me find Karl? Sap is looking for him,” Dream explains, scanning the area.

George laughs, raising his eyebrows. “Sapnap is... oh boy. Karl just left to look for him, actually.”

“Really?”

“Yup.”

They share a knowing look. George presses his palm to his forehead. “Those dorks.”

Dream shakes his head, chuckling. “Why am I not surprised.”

“I know where Karl was heading if you want to-”

“Oh, yeah! Sure,” Dream nods appreciatively, starting down the bleacher steps. “Thanks.”

They walk side by side in comfortable silence, heading towards the locker rooms. After a while, George can sense Dream's eyes on him. When George looks over, he casts his gaze downward, twisting his mouth. He looks to be thinking.

George waits until he finally speaks up.

"Hey, uh- I'm really sorry about the popcorn thing by the way," he says, not meeting George's eyes.

George flushes slightly at the memory. *He's apologizing?* If anyone should be apologizing, it's him. A sense of renewed embarrassment washes over him.

"It's no big deal," George says, playing with his jacket sleeve. "I shouldn't have reacted that way."

"I thought it was pretty funny," Dream's lips quirk upward in a small smile.

He puts his face in his hands and groans. "It was stupid. I shouldn't have done it."

Dream nudges him and George feels his heart flutter.

"Now I know not to flirt with you unless I want the nearest concession in my hair."

George tries to school his expression, but his brain screams. *Flirt, flirt, flirt*. He said *flirting*. That was *flirting*.

George swallows.

"Yup, you had better watch out," he says weakly, heart pounding. This is pathetic. Completely and utterly pathetic. George wishes desperately for a hole to crawl into. Thankfully, Dream interrupts his panicked train of thought by clearing his throat and pointing up ahead.

"Oh, there they are!" He says. George looks up, and sure enough finds Karl and Sapnap already mid conversation by the water fountain. They are laughing heartily.

"I wonder if Sap has asked him out yet," Dream remarks, catching George off guard.

"What?"

Dream shrugs casually. "That was the plan when I checked in with him earlier. We'll see how it goes."

"You mean he-? I can't believe..." George marvels, unable to keep himself from grinning. "Karl is going to lose his shit."

But as they watch from afar, Karl waves goodbye to Sapnap and jogs over to them, unfazed.

"Hey guys," he says, and they eye him expectantly.

No reaction.

"...How was that Karl?" George asks hesitantly, trying to read his expression.

Karl smiles, no more or less brightly than usual.

"Good! We should probably get going though George, Puffy is gonna want to talk to us before the game."

George and Dream share a confused look, but Karl is already walking back down the track. “You coming Gogy?” He asks, tilting his head.

“Y-yeah,” George stutters. “Okay.”

Dream points towards Sapnap- an unspoken question. George nods his own head towards Karl. Dream gives him a thumbs up, and they go their separate ways.

Once they have gotten a fair distance away, George leans forward to look at Karl’s face, rested in a state of calm cheerfulness.

“So... Karl...” He starts cautiously. “Did you and Sapnap talk about anything... interesting?”

Karl shrugs. “Yeah! We talked about the game and cheer for a bit.”

“Anything else...?”

“Oh! He asked me if I wanted to go see a movie next week too!”

George sighs in relief. “So he did ask you out!”

Karl’s head snaps to look at him.

“What?”

Uh oh. George pauses. “He... asked you out?”

Karl stops dead in his tracks. “No he didn’t.”

“Karl.”

“Wait-”

George runs a hand down his face in disbelief. “Oh my gosh, Karl you absolute idiot.”

Karl’s cheeks turn pink. “Wait. Wait. Wait.”

“Mhm?”

He claps a hand over his mouth. “He was-?”

“Yup.”

“And I-”

“Uh huh.” George folds his arms. “Please tell me you at least said yes.”

Karl runs a hand through his hair, mouth hanging open. “Of course I said yes! But I didn’t think- I didn’t know-” he sinks to the ground with a wail, muffled behind his hands. George snorts as he lays on the track, arms and legs splayed out like a starfish. A few passing college students give him a weird look as they walk past.

“I am never going to recover from this,” Karl says, completely deadpan. “I am going to stay on this track until I die.”

George kicks his foot. “Now don’t do that.” He shuffles around and leans over, blocking Karl’s view. “After all, you have a date next week.”



Karl moans pitifully and throws both arms over his flushed face.

\*\*\*\*\*

It is two minutes to seven when the Vincent family arrives. They're standing clumped at the entrance when George sees them, each getting stamped on the hand as they walk through. His heart skips a beat.

He catches Puffy's eye and points toward the group. She gives George a thumbs up, and he mouths a thank you, running to meet them beyond the front gate.

As he approaches, Betty waves excitedly and George smiles, waving back. "You made it!" He says, catching his breath, hands resting on his knees.

Camron laughs, looking around. "We sure did. It's fun to be at a football game again. I haven't attended one live in a while."

"Even you Miles! I really appreciate it," George continues, sidestepping to look at his oldest brother, hovering behind the rest of the group. Miles' expression softens and he lifts one shoulder. "I figured you went to enough of my games. It's about time I come to yours."

"You look wonderful by the way," Betty says, and George blushes, looking down at the green and white uniform. He pretends not to notice the way his father's gaze lingers on the skirt.

"Thank you Betty."

His mother wraps him in an eager embrace. "We're so excited honey. You're going to do great," she says, and George sighs, the scent of her familiar shampoo washing over him and settling his nerves.

This is going to be great. This is going to be wonderful.

A warning whistle blows on the field, and George presses a kiss to Alice's head, pulling away. "I've got to go now," he says, backpedaling away slowly. "I'll see you all after the game!"

"Good luck," Joseph says, his voice carrying above the chatter around them. His face is firm, but George can see the honesty in his eyes. It warms him to his core.

\*\*\*\*\*

By the time half-time rolls around, the contentment and ease that had filled his mind and body earlier is gone, replaced with ice cold fear. It seeps into George's bones and makes his knees knock together. He wills himself to stay calm, trying to focus on the football game instead of the massive timer ticking down to zero.

He's not sure why he's so nervous. Puffy was right when she said they've had the routine perfected for weeks. George can easily run through it in his mind, envisioning each aspect as it plays out. The stunts are difficult, but nothing they can't handle, and the roar of the crowd is something he should be accustomed to. But it's overwhelming. The sounds and the smells and the humid air overtake him, and George feels sick.

Thankfully, Niki approaches his place tucked under the bleachers with a sympathetic look. She sits beside him quietly, pulling her knees up to her chest.

"Hey."

“Hey.”

George repeatedly opens and closes his fist, squeezing it and letting his nails dig into his palm. Niki doesn't say anything for a long time, tracing little circles on her leg.

“George?” She finally says, and the sound yanks him out of his trance.

Niki's expression is open, and comforting. She takes his hand, the next words coming out soft and sincere.

“We believe in you.”

George stares at her, wide eyed. The timer buzzes, but he doesn't jump. Niki squeezes his hand once, and stands up, offering a small smile and a nod before going back to the track.

George takes a deep shuddering breath.

He can do this. Niki believes, and they *all* believe , and *he can do this* .

George strides out to meet his team, movements strong and certain. The announcer crackles over the loudspeakers as they get in position.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the Northview University cheer team!”

George leads them forward, gaze set firmly ahead, adrenaline pumping. They walk across the track, past the sidelines, and onto the center of the football field, floodlights bright on their skin.

Puffy and Wilbur watch side by side, Puffy biting her lip with anxious excitement. She doesn't even need to say a word for George to know her message. *I believe in all of you.*

*He can do this.*

*He deserves to be here.*

He looks out at the cheering fans, at Puffy and Wilbur. Then, in the buzzing, crackling, breathtaking moments before the music begins, George looks at Dream across the field, the blonde's eyes intense and focused. George drinks his gaze in, fire in his stomach, and doesn't look away.

The music starts. And the routine begins.

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For a few precious minutes, everything is perfect. They hold their final pose, and George gulps in delicious breaths of air. For a moment, he thinks he could fly. Simply lift his feet out from under him and float up up and away, until the applause and whistles of the crowd fade away into nothing.

Then... he is struck back to earth.

The figure near the entryway table would have been unnoticeable had you not spent years upon years of your life seeing him every day. If you hadn't toddled after him on wobbly legs as he cleaned the living room. If you hadn't had countless conversations with him before drifting off to sleep.

George can't tear his eyes away.

Joseph Vincent has his back halfway turned, stony face pressed up against the cell phone in his hand. He nods occasionally, before pacing a bit- interjecting a comment here and there.

George doesn't even realize that they're finished... that they're moving until Karl rests a hand against the small of his back and guides him forward with the rest of the team. He follows George's gaze and shakes his head, mouth pressed into a firm line.

George feels numb. But not the same kind of numb as when you land a perfect flip, the world still spinning around you, vertigo making your stomach jump. Not the same kind of numb as when a gorgeous honey haired boy brushes his arm against yours as you walk side by side. This numbness is hollow, and cold. It spreads across his limbs, making it hard to even lift his feet off the ground.

Joseph has the decency to look up when it's over, searching for his son.

George lets himself be guided across the turf like a ghost, hearing nothing, seeing nothing.

He feels empty.

\*\*\*\*\*

The rest of the game goes by in a blur. People pass by and congratulate him, but George barely manages to respond. The words trail in one ear and out the other, drifting away on the wind. He doesn't look in the stands. He doesn't look at Dream. He doesn't even look at Karl, who sticks by his side like glue for the last hour and half of the game. Karl doesn't ask him about it. They've been friends long enough, and he *knows*. Still, he can sense the anger rolling off his friend in waves, making the space between them stiff and charged, like the utterance of one word might just set it aflame.

George doesn't even register who wins or loses by the time the final whistle blows. All he knows is there are people everywhere, and it's loud, and he wants nothing more than to run the rest of the way home to his apartment. But he can't. Not yet.

Karl offers to go with him, but George declines forcefully.

"Maybe I could just be there for moral support," he says. "I can keep myself from beating his ass at least until you're finished talking."

"Karl."

"George."

George sighs. "You are going to do nothing of the sort. You are going to go find Sapnap or Quackity or Bad and you are going to go enjoy the rest of your night."

Karl protests, but George silences him with a firm hand on the shoulder. "Karl. Please. I'll be okay. I don't want you to spend the rest of your Friday night hung up on my dad being shitty."

Karl is displeased, but finally gives in, only after George promises to give him an update once he gets home.

*"I'll be okay."*

He is not okay.

As George fumbles his way through the crowd towards his mother's bright blue jacket, he begins

to wonder if this is all just an overreaction. After all, it was only one performance. A minute long phone call, if that. But George *hurts*, and he can't help but let that hurt fester and boil inside him. It's not a big deal. He should let it go. But George is *so tired* of letting things go. Of stepping aside. Of ducking his head, and pretending like he hasn't poured his whole life into this. And when he meets his father's eyes, something sparks, burning him from the inside out.

He stops five feet away from where they are sitting, just out of reach. Joseph averts his eyes, and George wants to scream, "*Look at me . Look at me, you stupid bastard. Look at your son. See me.*"

All that comes out is, "Why?"

Joseph scratches at his stubble, shifting in his seat. "I'm so sorry George, there was- well Jane called, you see- from Dennis' appointment... there were some complications and- well you can understand now, can't you George?"

"I don't understand," he replies, arms hung limp at his side.

Joseph waits to see if he'll continue. George does.

"I know that Jane, and Dennis, and work, and a million other things are important. I get it. They absolutely deserve your time, and love, and consideration. But why is it never me that's important?" George's voice breaks, and he tries and fails to maintain control.

His mother tuts something meant to be consoling, but George stops her with a hard look.

"No. Don't tell me I'm wrong, because you know it's true," he snaps, and Alice retreats, looking as if she's been slapped. George continues. "All I asked is for you to watch one performance. *One*."

For a moment, guilt flashes across his father's face, but he pushes it down, standing to meet George. "What was I supposed to do? Just leave Jane to figure things out? She needed me!" His voice raises defensively, nearing a shout. Passersby shoot them an uncomfortable glance and look away.

George ignores them, seeing nothing but his father towering over him, eyes churning with emotion. George feels like he's choking, each breath stabbing painfully through chest. His lip trembles. He can't cry. He won't cry.

The words spill out before he can stop them, tearing out of his mouth in a holler.

"That's all you've done for me!"

Joseph seems taken aback.

George takes another step forward.

"The only thing you've done my *entire life* is leave me to figure it out. College... relationships... cooking, shaving, dressing... all of it! All because I was different than the rest of us kids. Well guess what, Dad? I have." He heaves in a shuddering breath. "I just- for once I wanted you to see all of the shit I've figured out for myself."

The Vincent family is quiet, stunned into a weighty silence.

Unable to look at his mother's hollow eyes any longer, George leaves, his footsteps echoing as they hit the metal bleachers.

The tears well up as soon as his family is out of view, and he desperately blinks them away, his only thought *leave leave leave, hide hide hide*.

Puffy sees him run past, concern etched into her features, but George ducks into the men's restroom before she can get close enough to ask if he's alright. Once he is sure the bathroom is entirely empty, he shuts himself in one of the stalls, collapses onto the toilet, and sobs.

The sobs come in waves, seizing his whole chest and making it hard to see at times. He cries like that for what feels like hours, bent over on his knees, and holding himself.

Until a voice at the stall door gives him pause.

"George?"

George attempts to even out his breathing, still quaking with the effort.

"Dream?" He rasps, pressing himself against the back of the toilet, away from the shadow at the door. He hadn't even noticed him come in. George can see his worn black tennis shoes hovering on the other side.

Dream seems to be debating a course of action. Really, George isn't sure if wants him to leave without another word, or force the door open and gather George into his arms.

After a while, Dream speaks up in a small, worried voice. "Are you okay?"

George nearly breaks down into another fit of weeping right then and there, the tenderness in the other man's voice making his heart hurt. Instead he laughs, a broken, choked sound.

"Not really."

Dream hums, low and thoughtful, shifting his feet. "Okay."

George waits for him to continue. For a while, he doesn't. Then in a concerned tone, "Do you want to talk about it?"

George does want to talk about it. He wants to scream, and beat his fists against the door and say "*Look what he did, look what he did to me.*" But he knows that will get him nowhere.

"Not really."

Dream's shoes turn so they face the opposite way of the stall. He hears a gentle thud as Dream rests his back against the door.

"That's alright."

George sighs, pushing all the air out of his lungs in one long stream.

"Keep talking... please," he says, rubbing a thumb in lazy circles on his shoulder.

"About what?" Dream responds calmly, and George shrugs, though he knows Dream can't see it.

"Anything."

So Dream does.

He rests his duffel bag on the ground beside him, and sits against it on the tile floor. His voice

echoes a little, warm and smooth in the space.

George closes his eyes and listens.

Dream tells him about his family- about his little sister and how much he misses her. How they used to play pranks on their Mom whenever she would settle down for a nap. He tells George about his cat, who is apparently, “the most beautiful, lovable, loyal creature in the world,” and might as well be his best friend. He tells stories about running away from teachers who tried to drag him back inside after recess in grade school. About the little pond in his home town where all the neighborhood kids would get together and swim on the hottest summer days. He tells him that green is his favorite color, and that he doesn’t like tomatoes.

George breathes it all in like Dream’s voice is the only oxygen left on earth. He lets it fill him, soothing the ache inside if only for a moment. When Dream finally trails off thirty minutes later, everything feels still. Peaceful.

George steps forward, knocking on the door. Realizing that he is blocking the exit, Dream scrambles to his feet and takes a few steps away from the stall.

When George opens the door, Dream is watching him closely, perched a few feet away like he’s about to take flight. Seeing the way he rocks forward on his feet, eyes wide and honest, George isn’t able to hide the barely noticeable, grateful smile that crosses his lips. He keeps one hand planted on the open stall door.

“Thank you,” he says quietly. “For staying.”

“Anytime,” Dream replies, almost breathlessly, and George feels lightheaded.

After a moment, he gives a slight nod, and leads the way out of the bathroom, knowing Dream will follow.

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Sometimes George wishes he wasn’t so stubborn.

Dream walks him back to the near empty football field, swinging his arms with each step. When they reach the track, he pauses, looking around, then back at George.

He rubs his shoulder absentmindedly. “Do you uh, have a ride?”

Shit. George glances up at the stands, simultaneously hoping and dreading to see his family sitting there. But the Vincents are nowhere to be seen. Neither is Karl.

“Yeah,” he lies, regretting the statement as soon as he says it.

“Are you sure?” Dream asks.

“Definitely.”

“Ok. Cool.”

George bites the inside of his cheek, mind already calculating the distance it takes to walk home. It’s really not bad, just a few miles.

Dream hesitates, then glances over towards the parking lot. “Well, if you’re all set, I had better get going. I’ve got an early morning shift tomorrow.”

“Right! Of course. I won’t keep you,” George replies, trying to sound casual. “Good game,” he adds as an afterthought.

Dream’s lips quirk upward as he turns away. “Thanks. See you,” he says, then pauses. “I hope you feel better.”

And then he’s gone.

George watches Dream leave until he’s nothing but a tiny speck weaving between the distant cars. He stands there for a little longer, still, just breathing in the night air.

Weirdly enough, he does feel better.

Until he remembers that he’s a bit stranded. And it’s 12:30 am. Great.

“Would it have been that hard to ask for a lift home?” He mutters to himself, kicking a stray can of Mountain Dew.

“Decided to go for a late night run?”

The voice makes George jump, and he whirls around, only to find Wilbur watching him with a raised eyebrow. Wilbur picks up the can and tosses it into a nearby garbage can.

George grips his chest. “You scared me!”

Wilbur chuckles. “Sorry,” he says, not meaning it. He comes forward and slings George’s bag over his own shoulder. “You guys did wonderful today. Well done captain.”

George eyes the bag, but lets his coach take it. “I hardly did a thing. It was all them,” he says fondly. “But thank you.”

Wilbur doesn’t ask about his family. George can see the question in his eyes, but he keeps it on the tip of his tongue. Instead, he says, “Do you want a ride home?”

“That would be great,” George sighs gratefully, swallowing his embarrassment at having not planned ahead. He follows Wilbur out the front gate and to his tired old minivan. The seats are covered with blankets and papers and assorted gear for the team.

“Sorry it’s messy,” Wilbur says, clearing off the passenger seat. George tells him it’s no problem and slides in.

The car starts with shudder and George relaxes into the leather, the exhaustion of the day finally hitting him. He gives Wilbur his address, who plugs it into his phone. They leave the windows down, letting the humid Florida air seep in. The radio and the A.C. are broken (George knows from countless times carpooling with Wilbur and other team members up to competitions), but it still runs. Will has had the car since high school apparently, and while it’s on its last leg, he adores it.

The streets are nearly empty at this point, the traffic lights casting a hazy glow over everything. George loves nights like this. He’s found his thoughts are louder in the silence, and sometimes a long drive is the perfect solution to sorting them out.

When Wilbur finally speaks, it’s in a low, easy tone, his voice melting into the air.

“My parents were never too pleased with me when I decided to become a musician,” he says, as if he’s telling a bedtime story.

George's ears perk up.

"They always supported me in my love of singing and performing... until I grew up. And then it was *"What are you actually going to do with your life,"* and *"A hobby isn't going to pay your rent son,"* and *"It's time to let that go, and move onto real, concrete things."* Wilbur's voice lifts as he mimics his parents, pitching deeper, and then higher at different points. His hands tighten on the wheel, and George watches his face, gaze set firmly ahead.

George had known about Wilbur's music career. After all, coaching was just something he did to bring in a little extra money- the gymnastics experience in his youth qualifying him enough to get the job. While Wilbur loved their team to death, songwriting was his passion. He was good at it too. George would convince him to play his songs occasionally- during long car rides or over the top of warm ups- and he would sit there quietly, tapping his foot to the beat, a hidden smile on his face. George loved seeing the way his eyes lit up in those quiet moments.

Wilbur breathes out, letting his tense shoulders drop. The stoplight changes color.

"I was angry at them for a long time."

The car hums as it crosses the intersection, dipping as they hit an uneven section of road.

"I was young, and hurt, and passionate... and I didn't understand how anyone, *anyone* could be so cruel as to hold me back from what I loved. Couldn't care enough about me to care about my music. I thought they hated me. And I hated them."

George looks down, picking at a flaking piece of leather on the seat. The words settle in his head, assembling and disassembling over and over.

Wilbur continues. "And you know, a part of that nineteen year old me was right," he admits, eyeing George.

"Because you made a living out of it?" George responds, but Wilbur shakes his head.

"Not exactly. Because, George, nobody has the right to tell you not to fight for something you love."

The wind leaking through the windows feels hot on his face. "Oh."

The clicking of the turn signal fills his ears, and George watches the familiar scenery fly past. Cafes, and supermarkets, and little dog parks he has driven past a million times before. They all look different at night, without people there to fill them.

"But as the years went on I learned something," Wilbur says, and George tears his gaze away, focusing on his friend.

"I learned that sometimes when you love someone, it makes you afraid. You want the best for them. You want to see them grow, and become stronger, and find happiness. But there's always that fear. You're afraid you've given them too much of yourself. You're afraid to let them go. You're afraid that one day, they'll take that piece of you, and go so far... become so strong that they just don't need you anymore."

Blood pounds in George's ears, and he tries to ignore the way his chest twists painfully.

"It takes a lot of faith to let your child run away with something you don't trust... you don't understand. Because then and there, you've lost them for a little bit. It's terrifying to let go of that



control. To trust them with something they love.”

Wilbur rolls to a stop in front of George’s apartment and parks the car, letting his words hang in the air. “Now don’t get me wrong. Your father did a real shitty thing tonight. He should have been there, with you, in that moment. He should have been there for you at every moment.” Wilbur purses his lips, letting his hands fall away from the wheel. “I guess what I’m saying is that just because he messed up tonight... and doesn’t understand all this yet doesn’t mean he doesn’t love you George.”

George sits very still, eyes closed.

“Adults- actual fully grown adults- ...they can be real stupid. But in the end... they’re just as confused, and lost as we are.”

Wilbur pats him on the shoulder without looking up. He waits until George silently opens the car door, the rolling, twisting feeling in his gut having dissipated somewhat.

George pauses, resting one hand on the handle. “Thank you for the ride Wilbur,” he says quietly. “And for everything else.”

Wilbur tucks his head in a nod. “Goodnight George.”

“Goodnight.”

The car door shuts with a click, and Wilbur drives off, leaving him standing on the curb under the streetlight.

That night, George lies awake in bed for a long time.

## Chapter 4

### Chapter Summary

George gives the bag a weak kick and groans. “I put my extra clothes in my locker, thinking I could grab them later. Unfortunately for me, I did not grab said clothes later.”

Dream’s eyebrows shoot upward and he mouths an “oh.” They sit in uncomfortable silence for a long moment, before Dream speaks up.

“You could borrow some of mine?”

George almost chokes. “What??”

### Chapter Notes

And we're back! Sorry for the delay in getting this chapter out, but I was having some writer's block and wanted to get it just right. Thank you all so much for your support, it means the world. Special thanks to @skiggswastaken on Twitter and @gothtraits on Tumblr for beta-ing this chapter, and to my bestie Anika for always being there to pump me up in the google docs chat at 1 a.m. Hope you enjoy, and as always, feedback is always appreciated!

Social Media:

Twitter: \_GraceWrites\_

Tumblr: blockmenbrainr0t

Tiktok: perrytheplatypusnoise

At 4:30 am on a Tuesday morning, George’s car breaks down halfway to campus.

“You’ve got to be joking,” He groans, slamming his hands against the dash as the engine sputters and dies for the third time. Fortunately, he made it to the side of the road before the old Toyota rolled to a stop. Cheer is supposed to start in half an hour, and Karl isn’t answering his phone. Cars speed past, either not noticing, or caring about his predicament.

George shoots a quick text to Puffy letting her know he will be late, and then another to Karl.

*“KARL WAKE UP AND LOOK AT YOUR PHONE.”*

The text stays on delivered. Great.

He gets out of the car, resting against the side. It only takes a minute or so to contact roadside assistance, who claims they will be there to tow the car within the hour.

It has only been five minutes when a white car pulls up alongside George. He’s pretty sure he’s seen it before, but the tinted glass is too dark to see past. The car rolls to a stop and the driver

window rolls down.

George sighs in relief. "Oh thank goodness."

"It seems you're in a bit of a predicament, Cap," Niki says, an amused smile on her face. George grins back, patting the top of his car.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Niki rolls her eyes. "Just get in."

George laughs and opens the passenger door. "Thanks Niki, you're a lifesaver."

She starts the engine again. "Will your car be ok if you just leave it there?"

George shrugs, resting his head against the back of the seat. "It's getting towed either way, at least in this scenario I won't be stranded once it's gone. I'll follow up with them later."

"Sounds good. As long as you're sure," Niki replies, shifting gears and pulling back into traffic.

George glances down at his phone to find a text from Karl waiting for him.

*"Huh?"*

George clicks away from the message with a snort. How nice to know he has such supportive, punctual friends.

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"Are you sure you can't just tweak your schedule a little bit?"

On the other line, Bad sighs. "I'm really sorry George. If I had the time I would adjust for you, but between my job, and Skeppy needing to drive his siblings everywhere, that was really the only time we could do tutoring. If you wanted, I could always set you up with someone else from our class?"

George pinches the bridge of his nose. "No, that's alright. Thanks anyway. I'm sure I'll figure something out," he says kicking his legs underneath the kitchen table. "And thanks so much for all your help thus far."

A faraway voice is heard from the other end of the phone and Bad pauses to listen. "Oh! Good idea, I'll tell him," he calls back, before returning to his and George's conversation. "Skeppy said to ask if you knew about the math lab on campus?"

George takes a bite of toast absentmindedly. "I've heard we have one here, but I've never been."

"Yeah! It's just on the second floor of the Engineering Building. They're open pretty much all day and the tutoring is free for students. You might be able to make that work with your crazy schedule," Bad continues.

The math lab huh? He's never been before, but giving it a try couldn't hurt.

"Thanks Bad," George replies. "Maybe that's just what I need. I'll definitely stop by." He finishes off his afternoon snack and lazily brushes the crumbs off his lap.

"Anytime!" Bad responds. "Oh- and good luck with cheer! I know you guys want to be in top gear for competitions, but don't work yourself too hard," he says, and George scoffs.

“Tell that to Puffy.”

“Puffy’s not the one pulling all nighters to cram for midterms,” Bad fires back, and George knows he has a point.

“Ok fine. I’ll try and catch a few more hours of sleep here and there.”

“Eight hours.”

“Don’t push it.”

Bad laughs. “Okay, okay. I’ll take what I can get. But I’m serious. Take care of yourself, George. And don’t be afraid to ask for help if you need it. Keep me on speed dial.”

George smiles. “Will do. You’re the best, Bad.”

“I know. Don’t you forget it. See ya George.”

“See ya.”

George presses the end call button, and rests his forehead on the table. His eyelids are heavy, and a part of him wonders how bad it would be to fall asleep here for a little while- just close his eyes for a quick catnap. The thought is tempting. He is completely, and utterly exhausted.

Cheer practices have picked up in length and intensity lately as the team begins their preparations for competitions coming up at the beginning of the new year. Between extra long practices, and a packed class schedule, George is running on fumes, barely managing to drag himself out of bed in the morning. His grades are suffering nearly as much as his sleep, and he knows he needs to pull it together if he wants to get through the semester. Unfortunately, the saving grace of Bad and Skeppy’s tutoring sessions have been overtaken by the new cheer schedule, which runs an extra hour late into the evening on top of their morning practices. It’s looking like Quackity will be on his own with the lovebirds for a while.

George sets a reminder to check out the math lab after practice today, crossing his fingers it will still be open. As he goes to browse the school’s website for any information the refrigerator door at George’s back opens suddenly, and he jumps, whirling around to find Callahan pulling out a carton of milk.

“You scared me,” he exclaims, gripping his chest, and Callahan rolls his eyes. His roommate pours himself a glass and signs, “*Poor thing.*”

George points to the milk and pretends to gag, signing back, “*You monster.*”

Callahan shrugs with a grin, taking a sip.

George’s sign language experience is minimal, but the few years of ASL classes he took as a foreign language requirement in high school allow him to at least get across the basics. And whatever he doesn’t understand from Callahan’s unique way of speaking he is able to gather from the man’s expressive facial reactions and physicality. It’s not hard to read him. In fact, George sometimes forgets entirely that Callahan can’t hear him. It’s only when he reaches the end of whatever long winded rant he’s been on (about a difficult teacher... or some obnoxious guy at a party) that Callahan will smirk at him, tapping one finger against his ear, making George flush red in embarrassment and retell what he can of the story in ASL. He isn’t sure if Callahan waits till the end out of politeness or amusement.

*"Practice today?"* His roommate signs, glancing at the clock above the stove.

*"Waiting for Karl,"* he replies. *"No car, remember?"*

Callahan's mouth forms an "oh," of recognition as he nods. *"Have fun. I'm going back to sleep."*

*"Lucky,"* George adds, before Callahan disappears back into his room with a smug wave.

Karl arrives a few minutes later, handing George an extra coffee as he climbs into the car. He inhales the bittersweet aroma and sighs out a thank you.

*"Don't mention it,"* Karl replies knowingly, shifting gears.

*"What do you think Puffy would do if I just curled up in the locker room and stayed there for practice today,"* George mumbles, sipping at the drink and wincing as it burns his tongue.

Karl laughs. *"She'd probably drag you back out there... then text you at nine p.m. tonight telling you to take a melatonin and go to bed, or else."*

George snorts, looking out the side window. *"Yeah, you're right,"* he replies, tracing a finger down the glass. *"Good old Puffy."*

They stop at a red light and Karl glances over. *"Did you ever figure out what you're gonna do about tutoring?"*

George shrugs. *"Bad suggested the math lab. I'm going to head there after practice today and give it a try."*

*"That could work. Do you want me to wait up for you?"*

The light turns green. George closes his eyes, tilting his head against the cool surface. *"No, don't worry about it. I'll just walk home. It's not far."*

*"You sure?"* Karl questions, and George nods.

*"Yeah. I'll be fine."*

*"Alright, well tell me how it goes."*

*"I will. Thanks."*

As they pull up to the school, Karl lightly punches George's arm. *"Want me to distract the team for five minutes while you nap?"* He teases.

Karl's joking, but George knows he probably would if he asked. That's just the kind of friend he is. George leans over the middle console so his head lays on Karl's shoulder instead. He sighs dramatically, letting his whole body go limp while Karl tries to push him off.

*"I wish I could take you up on that kind offer my dear friend, but alas. Apparently I'm cheer captain or something and I guess I have to be responsible or whatever."*

*"Tragic, really,"* Karl replies in an equally dramatic voice.

*"I know, I know."*

Karl snickers patting both of George's cheeks. *"Let's go, Sleeping Beauty,"* he says and George

groans. “The future championship team is waiting for us.”

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George gets lost three times trying to find the math lab.

It’s shocking really, that he’s never been there once in his three years at Northview. But despite having visited campus hundreds of times, the tucked away room on the second floor proves to be quite elusive. George really only finds it by happenstance, overhearing two other students talk about it in the hallway and following them awkwardly from a ways off.

The math lab is surprisingly full- plenty of students and tutors mill about, sitting at tables throughout the room. Low chatter fills the space, and George immediately feels self conscious, despite the fact that no one has paid any mind to his entrance. The thought crosses his mind that if he wants help he’s going to have to *talk* to someone, and sit wedged at one of those long tables scattered with extra pencils and notebook paper. Terrifying. Why having a quick conversation with one stranger over homework intimidates him more than performing in front of hundreds of random people, George will never know. He debates leaving right then and there, but takes a few steps inside the threshold instead, knowing he’ll get an earful from Bad if he doesn’t at least give it a try.

He approaches one of the nearby tutors hesitantly, shuffling his feet.

The girl looks up and offers a smile. “Hi! Can I help you?”

George clears his throat. “Um, yes! I haven’t been here before, but I’m uh, here for help with math stuff? I think?”

The girl raises an eyebrow in amusement. “Well, I would assume so... people don’t wander into here to meet a hooker.”

George mentally kicks himself and chuckles nervously. “Right. Makes sense.”

“Go ahead and talk to Brooke over there, she’ll work with you today.”

George murmurs a thank you, shouldering his backpack, swallowing his pride and heading to the corner of the room.

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George only makes it a few feet off of campus when Dream’s car comes to a stop beside him, the passenger window down.

George tries not to look exasperated. “What are you doing?” He asks incredulously.

Dream shrugs, eyebrows raised. “I was going to offer you a ride home.”

A ride home huh?

The tutoring session had gone well for the most part. As soon as George was able to get over his initial apprehension and explain his questions to the tutor, the two of them were able to get through the assignment and out the door quickly, while there was still light out.

And that’s just it, there’s still light out, and George really doesn’t need a ride. Contrary to Brighton, Octobers in Florida are still relatively warm, and the walk home isn’t long- a mile and a half at

most. The walkways are paved, and George knows the way by heart. Dream has to know this. So why does he insist on being a bother?

"I'll pass, thank you," George replies curtly, continuing forward past the beat up truck and the curious football player.

Dream inches the car forward with him, undeterred. "Are you sure? It's really no bother."

How annoying.

"I'm sure."

Dream doesn't roll up the window. George huffs.

"Why are you even here anyways? It's way past school hours," he shoots back incredulously, then for good measure adds, "What, are you stalking me?"

Dream laughs loud, bending his whole body over the steering wheel as he does so. "You're giving yourself a little too much credit there George," he says, a smug, crooked smile stretching across his face. "We just got out of practice."

Ah.

Dream leans towards him, continuing. "Our little meeting here is simply happenstance, though you may wish otherwise."

George flushes hotly, covering his flusteredness with a scoff. "That's the last thing I'd wish for," he retorts, and Dream smiles wider, his eyes crinkling.

"Whatever you say, Captain."

Before George can tell him that *Dream* does not get to call him Captain, only his *team* gets to call him Captain, the tires are spinning, and the headlights have been flicked on.

Just as quickly as he arrived, Dream is gone... the distant whir of the engine trailing behind the shuddering truck the only reminder of his presence.

George stands there on the curb for a long moment, mouth agape. "Cheeky asshole," he finally mutters, kicking a nearby pebble and watching it skitter into the street. "The absolute audacity."

He tugs the straps of his backpack tighter, and opts to forget it ever happened. Just another maddening interaction to add to the book, right under "*winked at me in the hallway*," and "*spammed my snapchat until I added him back*," and of course, "*called me pretty while half conscious in his underpants under the stars*." He knows there are other moments that he keeps filed away, whispered stories across bathroom stalls that bounce around his brain in the late hours of the night, but those ones are harder to deal with. More complicated to sort out. So instead he sits with his irritation at this whirlwind of a man and tells himself repeatedly how much he can't stand him.

The only is, forgetting this one off incident becomes increasingly hard when Dream begins to offer George a ride *every day*.

It's ridiculous how quickly George learns to recognize the sound of the sputtering truck engine without even looking up. He shows up every day a little after 6:30 for weeks without fail. Like clockwork, the brakes squeal. The window rolls down. And George rolls his eyes as Dream's

stupidly radiant face comes into view.

*“Hi, George.”*

*“Good evening, George.”*

*“How was practice, George?”*

George never once slows his gait, and only rarely addresses the other man’s silly comments.

*“You know George, I was wondering, do you ever question why they made traffic lights red and green even though most color blind people can’t tell them apart?”*

*“I’m thinking of growing a mullet. Could I pull it off? Sap says it’s a horrible idea, but I think I could.”*

*“George, if you could be reincarnated as anything in the world, what would it be? And don’t just name some random animal. Really think about it. This would be for the entire rest of your life.”*

After the first few days of George denying him, Dream is forced to get creative.

*“You don’t understand George, I’m terrible with directions, and I really need to buy milk, but I have no clue where the supermarket is. Will you please help me get there, just this once? I’ll buy you an ice cream.”*

*“Did you hear there’s a massive hurricane headed our way? No? Well, apparently it already hit the newscasting stations, which is why you might not have gotten the warning yet. Crazy.”*

*“George would you hold on a second?? This is an emergency! Sapnap got stuck in the door because his ass is too fat! I need help getting him out!”*

*“We don’t even have to talk if you don’t want to. I’ll just sit here in silence, and you’ll open your car door to leave and we’ll both give each other a solemn nod and never speak of it again. I swear.”*

George hums loudly over the top of him, each time too prideful to stop and listen, yet too tired to make a run for it.

That is, until the rainstorm from hell.

It’s not a hurricane, like the ones Dream brings up every other day, but it might as well be. The rain pours down in buckets, the wind blowing it sideways so it pelts against George’s thin hoodie. Within a minute out in the elements, he is drenched to the bone, stumbling through the storm with one hand braced in front of his face. He had ditched tutoring last second, worried about getting home in the dark and rain. The thought crosses his mind to call Karl for relief, but he remembers his friend is already headed home to visit family for the weekend. Great.

So George trudges through it, ignoring the way water is pooling in his sneakers, making them squelch with each step. And then... *and then* to make matters unimaginably worse, a pair of familiar headlights cuts through the sheets of rain splattering against dark asphalt.

Dream.

George groans audibly and ducks his head, wiping dripping hair out of his eyes only for it to fall back to its original place.



Dream rolls down the window, and George whips his head around. "Go away!" He shouts over the wind. "You are the last thing I need right now!"

Dream pauses, holding a cupped hand outside, letting water collect in, then drip down the sides of his palm. "You sure?"

George throws his arms upward. "Yes."

Dream seems to consider his response, and for a moment George thinks he's won, and waits for him to drive off like usual. But Dream doesn't drive off. In fact, instead of starting up again, the engine dies.

And Dream steps out of the car.

Perfect.

He crosses in front of the headlights, eyes locked firmly on George's, which are wide with confusion and disbelief. He stops a few feet away, looking around.

"Well?" Dream finally says, eyeing the sidewalk ahead of them as if the howling wind and sloshy gutters are the most natural thing in the world. Rivulets of rain trickle down the strands of dirty blond hair and onto his already soaked letterman's jacket. He makes no move to push away the hair plastered to his forehead. George thinks he looks utterly ridiculous. And painfully attractive.

When George doesn't move from his place firmly planted in the ground, Dream shrugs. "Fine by me."

To George's astoundment, he strolls forward on his own, leaving George to eventually trail after him, tripping on his own feet. "Hold on a second-" he sputters. "What are you-? Now, not so fast Dream- wait!"

"You didn't expect me to let you walk home alone in this, did you?" Dream calls over his shoulder, and though he sounds serious, George can hear the teasing in his tone. He sounds boyish like this, looks it too- weaving up the walkway with a skip in his step, completely soaked.

George resists the sudden urge to giggle at the sight.

Fine. If this is all just a little game they play, George decides that just this once, Dream has won.

They are halfway up the block when George pauses, watching Dream with a hidden grin and narrowed eyes. He doesn't say a word, refusing to admit defeat out loud, but turns silently, heading back to the car.

For a moment, he thinks Dream doesn't notice as he backtracks the way they came at a leisurely pace. But suddenly, seconds later, the other man is rushing past him, bounding by on long legs, a gleeful expression on his face. George makes a noise of surprise as Dream pokes him in passing, then follows suit, racing him to the dull red truck. The grass squishes beneath his feet delightfully, and George has to be careful not to slip, the puddles splashing up with each pounding footfall.

They throw open the doors simultaneously, diving into the front seat with flushed cheeks and sopping clothes.

The doors shut behind them, and George tries desperately to chase his breath, head leaned backwards, eyes closed. His throat feels raw and his pulse races, leaving him feeling strangely giddy. A laugh catches deep in his chest, building and building until it bursts forth. Dream is close

behind, his laughter coming in choked wheezes that carry through the air and make George laugh harder. It continues like that seemingly endlessly until they are both holding their sides and gasping for air.

George looks over at Dream, with his broad shaking shoulders, and his dumb soggy varsity jacket, and salty tears leaking out of his eyes, and thinks he might be the most beautiful thing he has ever seen.

When Dream looks back, George feels himself falling.

“It only took the biggest storm of the season, but I finally got you,” Dream says, a proud smile on his face.

George forces himself to nod, and Dream bursts into another fit of giggles.

“That was fun.”

“It was,” George replies honestly, hands clenching into the fabric of his hoodie.

“I didn’t know you knew how to laugh,” Dream marvels, quieter now. George knows it’s a jab, but it sounds almost... fond.

He scoffs. “Now what is that suppo-”

A clap of thunder makes them both jump before George can respond. Dream waits for it to pass and whistles. “Man, these Florida storms sure do come on quick. Were you able to finish up practice before it hit?”

George nods, deciding to forget the previous comment. “Just barely. I had to skip out on tutoring though,” he replies.

“You’re a tutor?” Dream asks, and George feels vaguely embarrassed.

“Er- no. I’m the one being tutored.”

“Oh,” Dream replies, unbothered, tapping out a pattern on the steering wheel. “What subject?”

“Math,” George grumbles. “I’ve been so busy with competitions coming up that I’ve totally slacked off and fallen behind.”

Dream hums thoughtfully. “I’m pretty good at math you know.”

The window wipers dance back and forth. Back and forth. George raises one eyebrow. “Sure you are.”

Dream looks offended, turning to face him fully. “I’m serious! I used to run a coding club with Sapnap and a few others when we were kids. We were about as skilled as you could be for a bunch of twelve year olds. Not to mention the fact that I was a tutor in high school.”

“No kidding?” George responds, folding his arms. “Impressive.”

Dream crosses his legs and leans back in his seat. “What can I say? I’m a multi talented individual.”

George nods appreciatively, watching other cars fly by, a haze of water spraying out as they pass. The sounds have become therapeutic by now, blending with the whirl of the heater and the sliding

of the windshield wipers to create an oddly comforting symphony.

Dream worries his lip between his teeth. "I could uh, help you out?" He speaks up hesitantly, then hastily adds, "You know, just if you wanted."

George glances over at him in curious surprise. "Help me out?"

Dream fumbles. "Like tutor you? Just for today I mean. Since you missed it." The fingers tapping the wheel move faster.

"Oh." George blinks. "I mean, sure! If you don't mind, that is."

Dream's whole body relaxes like air being let out of a balloon, expression brightening. "Great! Not at all! As in no, I don't mind. At all. Cool."

"Cool." George repeats, feeling strangely jittery. Neither of them says anything after that. George hums a random tune under his breath to fill the time, and waits for Dream to start the car. ...And waits. And waits. And-

"Are you gonna...?" George starts slowly, gesturing towards the keys still in the ignition.

Dream jolts. "Oh! Right. Sorry." He quickly turns on the car with blocky movements, ears a bright scarlet.

George looks down and smiles softly.

They peel away from the curb with Dream's hands gripped tightly on the steering wheel, flushed bright red from head to toe.

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Dream makes it half of the way to George's apartment when George looks up in a panic.

"Oh uh, you're going to my place!" He exclaims, unsure of why he thought otherwise.

Dream shoots him a sideways glance. "Yeah? Unless you wanted to work at mine."

George's eyes brighten. "Yes! I do. I mean- is that alright?"

"Yeah, that's fine by me," Dream replies, pulling into the turn lane to flip around. George sighs in relief.

Images of Callahan, Jack and Sam hovering over the pair at the kitchen table flash behind his eyes. He hasn't brought a guy home in ages, and knows there will be hell to pay from his nosy roommates if he does so.

"Great. Thank you," George responds, running a tired hand down his face. "My place is just uh- really messy right now."

Dream nods absentmindedly. "I see. Yeah it's no problem."

George thanks him, pulling his bottom lip between his teeth nervously, as Dream drives them in the opposite direction. In the flurry of trying to keep them away from his apartment, the thought hadn't really settled that they are going to *Dream's apartment*. George tries to ignore the implications of that thought.

It only takes an additional ten minutes to reach Dream's dorm, which is just a stone's throw away from campus. He's seen the building before when driving into town, but never been inside.

"I warned Sapnap that we were coming, but I don't think he's even home." Dream says.

"You room with Sapnap?" George asks in surprise. "I didn't realize."

Dream nods. "Mhm. Us and a few other guys. They won't be a bother though. They're all pretty chill."

George wonders what Sapnap will think, potentially seeing him at his front door, Dream in tow. He hopes desperately that Sapnap won't tell Karl, otherwise he'll never hear the end of it.

"I'm not worried," he says instead.

Dream's apartment is surprisingly neat for being inhabited by a bunch of rowdy college boys. A few unwashed dishes are stacked in the sink, but the countertops and floor are clear.

"Sorry for the mess," Dream says hastily, moving a stack of papers and pencils off of the small kitchen table. George tells him that it's hardly a mess and Dream waves him off.

The living space is unadorned aside from a plain clock on the wall, and a few stray pieces of furniture. George isn't sure what he expected. Jerseys tacked to the cupboards? An overflowing trash bag of beer cans?

"This is... nice," he says, peeling off his wet socks and shoes in the entryway.

"Thanks," Dream replies. "You'd think that after living here two years we'd have a few plants or a tablecloth, but I guess we've never gotten around to it."

"We don't do much decorating at my place either," George chuckles, rubbing his still cold arms.

Dream takes notice of the action, then seems to realize for the first time the growing puddle at his feet. "Shoot. We should probably change first."

"Good idea," George says, reaching into his bag for the school clothes he had worn before practice. Dream starts toward what must be his bedroom.

George, to his shock, finds nothing. "Shit."

He feels around every pocket and opening, moving his cheer uniform, wallet, and other necessities aside. No clothes.

Dream watches, one hand on the doorknob. "You good?"

George suddenly remembers tossing the extra clothes into his locker in a hurry to get to practice on time, having made a mental note to pick them up after tutoring. He tosses the bag down miserably. "I am an idiot."

"Is something wrong?" Dream asks hesitantly.

George sighs. "I forgot my clothes at the school," he mumbles.

"Huh?"

George gives the bag a weak kick and groans. "I put my extra clothes in my locker, thinking I

could grab them later. Unfortunately for me, I did *not* grab said clothes later.”

Dream’s eyebrows shoot upward and he mouths an “*oh*.” They sit in uncomfortable silence for a long moment, before Dream speaks up.

“You could borrow some of mine?”

George almost chokes. “What??”

When he looks up, Dream is avoiding eye contact, cheeks a healthy shade of pink. “I mean, I could probably find something-” the rest of the sentence dies in his throat as his eyes trail across George’s small form. Dream blushes further. “Okay maybe not something that fits... but I’m sure I have an extra T-shirt lying around.”

George feels his face grow hot, and he swallows hard. “Oh. Alright. That- uh... that would be great,” he manages weakly, trying not to think about *wearing Dream’s clothes*. Wearing *his* clothes in *his* apartment after riding home in *his* car. It’s all too much.

Dream bites the inside of his cheek and gives an awkward thumbs up before disappearing into his room, leaving a trail of wet footprints in his wake.

George wants to zip himself inside his duffle bag and never come out.

Dream returns a few minutes later with a bundle of fabric tucked in his arms. “They’ll probably be a little big, sorry,” he admits. “But it was the best I could find.”

George eyes the clothes, accepting them numbly. “Thanks.”

“Bathroom is down the hall on your left,” Dream says, pointing. “You can change in there, then we’ll get started.”

George follows his directions, padding down the hallway begrudgingly, shoving down the fluttery feeling in his stomach. This is bad. This is very very bad.

As it turns out, Dream’s clothes are not “a little big.” They are huge. The worn out grey T-shirt hangs off him like a jumbo size trash bag, the hem almost brushing his knees. The logo across the front is so faded now, George can barely make it out. Some sort of club compensation gift he would guess. The sweatpants are even more of a problem, bunching in pools of soft fabric around his ankles. George thanks whatever god above that they at least have a cinch strap around the waist. He pulls the strings as tight as they will go and ties them together, praying that the knot will hold. He doesn’t feel like dropping his pants for Dream on this particular day.

The worst is yet to come though, George finds as he tips his head down to take in the ensemble. As his chin brushes the worn shirt collar George can’t help but notice the shirt has the distinct smell of spice, and turf, and something else he can’t pinpoint. Of *Dream*. George thinks he might go mad.

Before he shuffles out of the bathroom, he looks at himself in the mirror. The collar of the shirt slips over one pale shoulder and he tugs it back on with pursed lips and a clenched jaw.

This will have to do.

Dream is already at the kitchen table when he arrives, sipping from a mug of hot cocoa. He sees a similar mug resting in front of the open seat. Dream is wearing a deep green (at least George thinks it’s green) sweater and grey sweats, his hair starting to dry and curl at the tips. It looks fluffy and frizzy and some part of George wants to run his hands through it.

Dream looks up as he comes around the corner and freezes, the cup still halfway lifted to his lips. He coughs as the drink goes down the wrong pipe.

George tries not to feel self conscious, tugging at the loose fitting shirt collar again. Dream's gaze is somewhere faraway, and he wets his lips. "Wow. They're..."

"Not quite my size, yeah," George retorts nervously, looking anywhere but where Dream is sitting there staring at him with wide eyes.

"Mhm," Dream replies absentmindedly, and George knows he doesn't imagine the way Dream's eyes rake over the exposed patch of skin where his collarbone meets his shoulder. He makes no move to cover it this time, allowing himself to burn under Dream's gaze. His throat feels dry.

"Shall we?" George finally croaks, gesturing to the open notebooks on the table.

Dream snaps out of it, shaking his head. "Yes, of course, sorry," he says. Then as an afterthought adds, "I got you hot chocolate."

"Thanks," George replies, sitting down at the opposite side of the table. He pulls out his latest failed math exam, sliding it across the table to Dream. He expects a low whistle at the score, or a backhanded comment, but Dream just looks over it calmly, tapping his pencil against his mouth. "You're on the right track," he hums, once he's reached the end.

"Really?"

Dream, with his cheek resting in one hand, circles a few places on the worksheet with a red pen. "Yeah. It looks like you have the equations down for the most part, you're just missing a step, which is throwing off your answers."

George nods along, watching his hands as they glide across the paper. Dream has beautiful hands, he thinks absentmindedly. They are larger than his, the skin darker and tougher, but his fingers still delicate somehow, long and slender.

"If you look here, you added by  $h$  before you multiplied by  $f$ , which got you the wrong answer when it came time to divide. Swap those around and you should be good on most of them. Then if you look here, Question 6 is a bit different..."

Dream's voice fades into a gentle rumble in the background as he continues to work through each problem one by one. George leans over on the table, sipping his hot chocolate and interjecting questions when necessary. Dream is surprisingly patient, and surprisingly good at math. George can't help but admit that he leaves Dream's dorm that night with a begrudging sense of respect for the man.

Dream drives him home an hour later, though some part of George wants to stay longer. There's something comforting about the sound of Dream's voice, the way he speaks quicker when he gets wrapped up in an especially confusing explanation, then pauses and softens to check in and make sure George is following. He should have brought more homework.

George doesn't complain this time when he gets in the car, nor do they tease each other into fits of giggles. Instead, they sit in companionable silence, only the sound of the blinker clicking filling the air. The rain has stopped by now, leaving the air thick and humid. George can almost taste it as he rolls down the driver side window and breathes it in. Dream watches as he lets his arm hang out, coasting on the wind as it rushes by. Dream watches him a lot, George notices.

George doesn't go back to the math lab after that night.

It's an unspoken agreement, this whole tutoring situation. George never explicitly agrees, but he starts waiting at the front doors of the school instead of walking home. Dream finds him there every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, coming around the front of his car to open the passenger door just as George reaches it. He would never admit it, but the gesture never fails to make his stomach flutter.

They abide by a strict schedule... at first. Perhaps they could get through the assignments quicker if Dream didn't insist on doing everything under the sun besides address George's forgotten homework. He shows George the half finished projects he keeps under his bed- unidentifiable sculptures that have started to crack with age... song lyrics of which Dream has long since forgotten the tune, poetry scrawled on the back of chemistry tests that makes George blush and fiddle with his hands. He tells George more stories from his childhood, memories filled with sunlight, and beach trips, and family. George is warmed just listening to them.

Sometimes Dream cooks for them. He's far better at math than he is at cooking, but that doesn't stop him from trying out a new recipe every night, laughing loudly when George winces at the first bite. George brings his own recipes from home on occasion, nudging Dream away from the stove with one hip, and silently passing him a list of ingredients. They eat on the couch, always on the couch, with their feet kicked back on the small coffee table, and the fan turned on to full blast.

Friday nights turn into movie nights. Another unspoken agreement. It all starts when George admits he hadn't seen *Because of Winn Dixie*, over a steaming bowl of homemade clam chowder.

"I don't think I've ever heard of that movie in my life," George raises one eyebrow and Dream throws his hands up in the air in astonishment.

"You're kidding! The dog one?"

George groans. "Oh no... it's a dog movie?"

Dream rolls his eyes in exasperation. "Yes it's a dog movie. And a damn good one at that. My older sister and I watched it so many times when we were younger that we broke the VHS."

George types something into his phone and slides it across the table with an overexaggerated grimace. "Oo, only 55% on Rotten Tomatoes, Dream. I'm seriously doubting your taste."

"That's a load of bullshit," Dream replies, pushing the phone back without looking at it. "Watch it with me now and then you can decide for yourself," he dares, pointing his spoon at George.

"We haven't even gotten to my homework yet," he chuckles and Dream folds his arms.

"I'll fill in all the answers for you if I have to, just please watch the movie. *Please*, George. Just this once."

"I'm not letting you cheat for me," George responds, and Dream slouches. Then, with a sigh, he continues, "But... I guess I don't have anything I need to be up early for tomorrow. So just this once, I'll watch your dumb dog movie."

Dream perks up immediately, standing up from his seat in excitement. "Really?"

George shakes his head, trying to hide the fondness. "Yes, really. But finish your food first. I didn't slave away at it for an hour only for it to lay there cold and forgotten."

Dream grins sheepishly and slides back into his seat, going back to eating. "Right. Of course."

This time, there's no bowl of popcorn between them when they sit down in front of the glowing TV, but George still feels a strange sense of déjà vu. He sits on the farthest end of the couch from Dream, and spends the whole movie regretting it, aching to be closer.

Dream cries at the end, and though he could, George doesn't laugh at him. Instead, he gets up and goes to the kitchen, coming back with a package of napkins, because he doesn't quite know where to find tissues. Dream doesn't seem to mind, accepting them with a watery, partially embarrassed smile.

George doesn't particularly like *Because of Winn Dixie*. He tells Dream it's his new favorite dog movie anyways. Dream beams at that, and it's worth it.

A month and a half into studying/dinner/movie nights, George sits one cushion closer to Dream. It's a small gesture, but one that makes his pulse race. Even then, they don't touch. But Dream doesn't take his eyes off him the entire time, his Adam's apple bobbing occasionally whenever George catches him staring.

Sapnap becomes accustomed to George's presence in their living room. The first time he snickers at the two of them, making some offhand comment about "interrupting date night," but after a few weeks, he simply waves, and asks George about school, and cheer, and life. He joins them sometimes, for games and movies and meals, brightening the atmosphere just by being in the room. George can see why Karl likes him. Sapnap is funny and easy going, knowing when to tease mercilessly, and when to sit back and listen. He's a great storyteller, an expert at Uno, and loves rom-coms more than George and Dream combined. He makes George laugh so hard one time that he spits out his water mid swallow, which only serves to make Sapnap and Dream laugh even harder, Dream falling onto the floor and pounding his fist against it. George thinks it's a shame they didn't become friends sooner.

He doesn't tell Karl about the late night visits to Dream's apartment, and makes Sapnap swear not to tell either. As much as he hates keeping secrets from Karl, whatever this *thing* is with Dream is, it's simply too hard to explain.

Maybe it's hard to explain, or maybe George just doesn't *want* to explain it. Because speaking the words aloud makes them real, because then he'll have to *think* about it, and thinking about *it* always leaves George feeling confused, and jittery and uncertain. No, George doesn't tell Karl that he spends his evenings sitting close, but not too close to Dream. Doesn't tell him how he ignores the way his heart races when they stand side by side at the countertop in the early hours of the morning, washing dishes and whispering about broken dreams and things they'll never have.



## Chapter 5

### Chapter Summary

He's close enough that George can see the freckles across the bridge of his nose, and the scar on his chin from falling off a skateboard when he was eight. He's real, and vibrant, and a little worn down, and George doesn't know how to handle it.

Because Dream... Dream is just looking at him.

### Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all your sweet comments, and to my awesome beta readers, @skiggswastaken and @gothtraits. All of your guys' feedback is what keeps me going, so don't hesitate to leave a comment!

Be warned that this chapter does contain brief homophobia, verbal abuse/bullying and vomiting. None of these things are described in detail, or take place for very long, but if any of this triggering to you please be aware and take care of yourself as needed.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George is three bites into their meal of chili and cornbread when he sets his glass down loudly and leans back, eyeing Dream across the table. "What?" He finally asks, exasperation tinging his tone.

Dream's gaze darts up. "What?" The other man repeats, a confused expression on his face. His food sits untouched.

George sighs, ducking under the table to gesture to Dream's leg, which has been bouncing up and down rapidly for the past several minutes. "That."

The bouncing stops and Dream makes a noncommittal hum. "I don't know what you mean."

George gives him an incredulous look. "You're not eating."

Dream shrugs in return and takes a bite of chili, the hint of a smile on his face. "Yes I am." He gives a thumbs up. "Delicious. You've outdone yourself George."

George shakes his head, raising an amused eyebrow. "You have something on your mind. Spit it out. I don't think I can deal with *this*," he gestures to Dream, who is picking at his cornbread smugly, "For the rest of the night. Whatever you have to say, get on with it."

Dream tries to look innocent, but the smile on his face is threatening to burst. He twirls his spoon around the bowl. "It's nothing really."

"Well tell me your 'nothing' so you'll stop fidgeting and actually finish your dinner."

Dream shrugs again, casting his eyes towards the ceiling. He lets out what must be the longest,

most annoying drawn out breath George has ever witnessed before speaking. “Oh you know... I’m just the new starting quarterback. That’s all.”

“What??”

With that, Dream whoops and pushes away from the table just as George jumps to his feet, hands slammed down on the wooden surface in surprise.

“You- you what??” George repeats dumbly, eyes wide.

Dream throws both fists in the air triumphantly, practically bouncing in place. “You heard me! Number 22- Dream Bennett is *the* new quarterback at Northview. The *it* guy. The head honcho.”

George doesn’t know where the surge of utter excitement and glee comes from, but suddenly they’re both jumping and cheering, and George is throwing himself at the other man just as he reaches out to take his hands.

“You’re moving up! You did it!” He shouts, gripping Dream by the forearms, as Dream laughs and nods rapidly.

“The other guy is taking the rest of the season off because his wife is having a baby any day now, so I’m filling in.”

Dream starts bouncing again and George’s hands are on his face and he’s babbling something like, “I can’t believe it! I mean I *can* believe it- you’re very good, Dream- but as a sophomore? This is amazing! Just think of how much more playing time you’ll get! Oh I’m so proud of you!” And Dream is grinning from ear to ear and his cheeks and ears are pink and suddenly there’s nothing stopping them. They are free and weightless and the chili is getting cold and George doesn’t care as he spins away ecstatically.

Dream watches and touches his cheek absentmindedly where George held him.

Sapnap comes out of his room, bleary eyed and confused, followed a minute later by Eret and Punz from their respective rooms.

“What the hell is going on?” Sapnap mutters.

Dream and George talk over each other rapidly, explaining the very good reason they are shouting wildly in the kitchen at nine p.m. at night. Once the story is finished they all gasp and cheer and take turns clapping Dream on the back. The food stays forgotten in favor of a cheap bottle of wine toasted in plastic cups, and parading down the dorm halls with Dream on their shoulders until an R.A. steps out to yell at them to keep the noise down.

They all sleep in a puddle on the shitty living room carpet. And George, wedged up between a snoring Dream and Sapnap, thinks this is the happiest he has been in a long time.

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He thinks Karl knows. Knows *what* exactly he isn’t sure, but George can see the calculating look in his best friend’s eye when he tells him for the third time in a row that he can’t hang out because he has tutoring for the rest of the night.

Really, he should just tell him. Just say, “Yeah, have I mentioned Dream and I kind of get along now, and he tutors me three times a week for no other reason than he wants to spend time with me, and sometimes he’s the last thing I think about when going to sleep, and the first thing I think

about when waking up in the morning? No? I haven't? Well..."

George winces. No. He can't. He's not ready to have *that* conversation. It shouldn't be that hard right? To never mention these little "more-than-tutoring" sessions until the day he dies? It has got to be easier than explaining it all to Karl.

So he doesn't. He doesn't, and he feels a little bit like he's living a double life. It leaves him feeling guilty, but also a little bit thrilled.

His car gets back from the shop and he keeps waiting for Dream's truck to pull up after practice, even though he doesn't need a ride. He texts Dream dumb jokes he found online to make him laugh, and spends his breaks after school looking up ingredients and new recipes.

And then the facade breaks. It's an ordinary Friday, and Dream has to go help his grandparents move into a new house, so they forego the usual movie night. With his newly empty schedule, George shoots a quick text to Karl saying he can make it to hang out with everyone.

He hasn't seen them all together in a while now, so he's looking forward to catching up on Quackity's latest chaotic escapades and Bad's endless ugly pictures of his dogs. Dream sends him off with well wishes, asking for George to say hi on his behalf, and invite the group over for dinner and a movie next Friday at his place.

George nods, entirely forgetting the *other* thing Dream sends him off with- that is until he walks in the door of Karl's apartment.

"What are you wearing?" Karl questions the instant he is through the threshold.

George looks down.

Oh no.

Quackity lets out a cackle and chimes in with, "Oooo... where's the jacket from Gogy?? Do you have a secret boyfriend you haven't been telling us about?" He claps his hands and throws his head back with laughter, watching George's mortified expression.

Karl hums, narrowing his eyes. "You know, that is a very good question, Quackity. I am definitely looking forward to George's response."

George feels his face grow hot, hastily tugging the oversized varsity jacket off his shoulders and hanging it over the nearby chair. He desperately hopes they won't recognize it.

"I took the wrong one," he says lamely, trying to make it sound natural. He avoids Sapnap's confused stare across the room.

"What do you mean?" Karl asks and George swallows.

"I was in a hurry to get over here after practice, and I guess I accidentally grabbed some random football player's jacket instead of mine." He chuckles nervously. "I'm sure they'll be really confused when they try on theirs only to find out it's three sizes too small."

Quackity giggles at the image, and Bad hums in understanding. "Oh that makes sense. Poor guy."

"We'll just have to keep an eye out for some football jock in a cheer sweater on Monday," Quackity adds.

Sapnap smirks and George shoots him a warning look. "Guess so," he says cheekily.

Karl looks between George and Sapnap with a look that he can't quite read. "I'll just have to have *my* football player do a little investigation into the culprit," he says pointedly, narrowing his eyes at Sapnap, who gulps and turns pink.

"I'm sure there's no need for that," George responds weakly, but Karl waves him off.

"No no, I've got to get to the bottom of who this jacket belongs to. It's really very important, George, I'm sure you can understand."

George resists the urge to groan. Well now he's done for. He curses Dream for offering the jacket in the first place. He was only a little cold, and would have been fine without it, but Dream insisted, tossing it to him and refusing to take it back as he drove away. And look where that got him.

"Can we just talk about something else," George groans in exasperation, and Karl seems to give up temporarily, offering George an Oreo and crossing to the couch to sit by Sapnap.

Sapnap raises his eyebrows at George as if to say, "*Good luck*," before putting his arm around Karl.

Bad deals out five decks of cards and waves George over, who complies.

"Aw man, not Uno," Quackity whines. "Sapnap always wins at Uno."

Sapnap shrugs and smirks. "What can I say?" Karl scoffs and swats him goodnaturedly.

George takes a hand of cards and grins, taking a seat on the floor. "Don't worry Q, we can play Apples to Apples after this so you can kick all of our asses."

Quackity pumps one fist and settles into his chair, putting up the foot rest, satisfied for the time being.

George begins sorting his cards absentmindedly.

This is fine. It will be fine. He'll just return the jacket on Monday and everyone will forget it ever happened.

"Starting color is yellow," Bad says, flipping over the top card. "Who's up first?"

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Karl stops George on his way out, inches away from freedom.

"Not so fast," he says, catching George by the arm. "I just want to talk."

George winces, letting himself be pulled back to the room. "That's exactly what I'm afraid of."

Karl takes a seat at the kitchen table, leaving George to slump down beside him. "I'm not gonna lecture you or anything," he chuckles, and George lays his head down on the cool surface in defeat.

"I know," George admits, avoiding eye contact. He wants to tell Karl. He really does... just doesn't want the complications that come with it. He should have known he wouldn't be able to keep it a secret for long though.

Karl stretches, splaying his hands out. "So... there's a guy?"

George screws his eyes shut and shakes his head. "No. There's not a guy."

Karl hums and places his hand on George's head, running fingers through his hair absentmindedly. "Okay... well where did you get the jacket?"

George huffs. "... A guy."

"Interesting," Karl replies, and George can hear the smile in his voice. Though he wants to resist, everything about Karl is soothing. The slow movements of his hand in George's hair, his even, non judgemental tone... he feels his barriers breaking down with each second that passes. It's hard to keep anything from him.

"Ok, so there's maybe, kind of a guy," George gives in. "But it's nothing really. I just... we just... I don't know."

Karl waits for further explanation that doesn't come before continuing. "Okay. That's alright." He pauses, thinking. "Well, tell me about this 'nothing.' You're clearly very worked up about it."

George traces a finger up and down his arm, trying to find the right words. How does he go about explaining this? And on top of that, Karl's right- if it's nothing, why *is* he so worked up about it? Because he had initially talked shit about Dream and is now being forced to come to terms that he might have been wrong? Because it's Sapnap's best friend, and neither of them have told Karl?

He settles with, "It's complicated."

Karl laughs. "It's a guy. Of course it's complicated."

George smiles softly at that, finally looking up at Karl for a moment. "I guess I just don't know how to feel about him yet?" He chews on his lip nervously. "I feel like I still can't get a read on him."

"Do you like him?"

As what? A friend? A math tutor? A potential boyfriend?

"I don't know if I should like him," George answers carefully. "He kind of has a bad reputation."

"Because he's a football player?" Karl raises one eyebrow, gesturing towards the varsity jacket. "They're not all bad you know. Trust me." He chuckles.

"It's not that. It's just... I don't know. It's like he's two different people. One of them is this big-headed, dumb, asshole jock that hangs out with a bunch of jerk-offs that could really use a kick to the nose."

Karl leans his own head down on the table so he's facing George. "And the other?"

George sighs reluctantly. "The other... picks me up when it's raining... and works hard to cook me really shitty meals, and shows me dumb movies, and dumb poems, and... and..." He trails off, feeling more confused than when he started.

"Whoever he is, he seems like he cares about you a lot." Karl replies, tilting his head slightly. He reaches one arm out and pulls George in for a hug.

George doesn't resist, burying his face in the warm sweater.

Karl continues. "But I also trust your judgement. If you think he's gonna screw you over, then I don't want you getting hurt. There will always be guys out there with lousy cooking skills after all." He pokes George, who giggles under his breath.

"You're right," he says somewhat shakily. "As usual."

"As usual," Karl repeats, ruffling his hair.

They sit there in comfortable silence for another moment before Karl speaks again. "And you know, it's fine that you don't want to introduce him now," he starts, and the little bit of guilt in the pit of George's stomach returns. "But when you are ready, and if it ends up working out, I'd love to meet him," Karl says, and George tucks his head in a small nod.

"Of course," he replies, not meeting Karl's eyes. "I'll be sure to bring him around."

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Some little part of George doesn't want to give the varsity sweater back. As much trouble as it has caused, it's warm, and smells like Dream, and in a way, it's a distinct reminder that someone cares. Someone is looking out for him.

But it's not his, and Dream is *not his*, so George finds himself sitting in the bleachers, watching the football team finish practice, ready to hand over the jacket as soon as they are finished.

It's a particularly cool November day, and the faint breeze is just enough for George to keep the sweater on for the time being, instead of in his lap. It's not a big deal. It's cold, (well, cool at least), and Dream did give him the jacket so why wouldn't he put it to use?

Still, it feels different wearing it here in public, as opposed to on the lonely walk up to his apartment late at night.

Schlatt blows the whistle as they finish their last scrimmage, shouting something to the team and shooing them away. The football players disassemble, grabbing water bottles and helmets and running over to the other end of the metal stands where they have dumped the rest of their gear.

Dream catches his eye almost immediately, breaking into a wide smile and waving from his place on the field. George waves back as the jersey-clad figure he begins to jog towards him. A few other players trail behind, smacking Dream on the back and chattering about the upcoming playoff game.

Dream slows his pace to a walk once he reaches the track and George stands, going to meet him.

"You guys looked great out there," he starts, nodding his head encouragingly.

Dream's companions slow their pace just a bit, eyeing George with interest.

Dream gets halfway through a "thank you," before one of his teammates, a dark haired boy George doesn't recognize, butts in.

"We looked great, huh?" He smirks, hovering over Dream's left shoulder, wiping at the sweat clinging to his forehead.

George frowns and the smaller boy beside Dream chuckles, covering his overly wide mouth with one hand and raising an eyebrow.

“What do you mean...?” He questions and the taller one folds his arms.

“I mean, I noticed you were watching us play, but I think you may have the wrong idea.”

George feels his stomach sink. Oh. “No, that’s not what I-” he fumbles.

“Hey, hey, don’t worry. We understand- George? Is it?”

George feels his throat closing and tries to force out a reply, to no avail.

Dream looks between them, brows furrowed, mouth set in a hard line. “Guys. Quit it,” he mumbles, which only seems to amuse them more.

“It’s really just us being polite that we let him know our *preferences* now,” the boy with the too-wide smile says under his breath. “Wouldn’t want George here getting the wrong idea and getting his hopes up.”

Stupid. That’s all this is. Just a bunch of stupid boys with their stupid words and their stupid jokes that aren’t all that funny. He feels squeamish.

Dream takes a step towards the smaller boy, who’s eyes widen ever so slightly. Before Dream can say anything though, the leader claps one sweaty palm on his shoulder. “You know we’re only teasing, Bennett,” he cuts in, tone laced with fake sincerity. “No need to get all up in arms. We would never want to upset your little boyfriend.”

Dream flinches ever so slightly, and grits his teeth. “He’s *not* my boyfriend.”

And it’s true. So why...

George tries repeatedly to swallow the lump in his throat, his skin feeling hot all over. He doesn’t know *why* the comment stings. He’s not Dream’s boyfriend. He’s not... so why does it feel like a betrayal? Why does he feel like he’s just been slapped?

“Then why’s he wearing your jacket?” The dark haired boy snarls, and George glances down at himself. A feeling of nausea and panic washes over him and suddenly his only conscious thought is *Get. It. Off. Get it off, and get away.*

Before he can see the horror and embarrassment flood Dream’s face at the comment, he rips the offending piece of clothing off, peeling it away from his skin like it burns. And it does. He’s burning. He’s burning alive along every inch of skin and all he can do is look at the ground and toss the sweater as hard as he can into the dirt.

He meets Dream’s eyes with a glare.

“I didn’t ask for it,” George spits- to Dream, or his teammates, or himself he doesn’t know.

He doesn’t wait for the blonde’s reaction, walking away in the opposite direction as quickly as he can manage, hot tears pricking the backs of his eyes.

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George makes it in the doorway of his apartment, hoping to never see another human being again.

To his dismay, Callahan is already at the kitchen table, eyebrows quirked in a vaguely nervous, questioning expression at his demeanor.

*“Is everything o-”*

George swallows a scream of frustration, dropping his backpack in the entryway with a loud *thump*.

He scours his muddled brain for the right words, unable to conjure up any coherent sentences.

He settles for, *“Fuck. Bad. Bad bad men. Bad day. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.”*

Callahan only looks more shocked, and more confused.

An angry sob escapes, and George shrugs, unable to get out anything else.

Leaving his bag slung front of the door, George storms past the table to his bedroom, slamming the door.

*Fuck. Bad. Bad bad men. Bad day. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

No kidding.

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George doesn't speak to Dream for two weeks.

Texts and calls build up, but George ignores them, tossing his phone across the room and rolling over in bed. Karl calls too- the next day- and Bad, and even Wilbur, but he can't bear to hear the pity in their voice when he tells them why he's been ignoring them. The anger. He has too much of that rolling around inside him already.

He doesn't show up at school at first. Or practice. Puffy texts him asking what's wrong and he tells her he's sick, unable to get out of bed.

Which isn't quite a lie. The first night, he cried until he threw up, body overwhelmed and exhausted and unable to handle the events of the evening.

George feels weak. Here he is, shuddering over a toilet bowl over a *boy*, and the fact that said boy's stupid friends decided to pick on him. He's been through this before. When you're small in middle school, you get bullied. When you're small, and like boys instead of girls, you get bullied worse. He's gone through that shit already and come out stronger for it. He's found people who love and accept him as is.

So why does this still hurt so much? He's a junior in college, but suddenly he's thirteen again, coming home crying to his mother because of some offhand comments thrown around a P.E. locker room. Except his mother isn't here. And this cramped dorm room hardly feels like a home.

Maybe he should call her.

But then Alice's face from a month ago is in his mind... disappointed, and sad, and afraid, and George doesn't think he can handle any more of that right now.

So instead he sleeps. And tries to rehydrate. Tries to get better.

He comes back to cheer two days later.

He lets Karl and Quackity take him out to lunch three days later.



One week later he sits down with Callahan on the twin bed in his room and apologizes, calmly relaying the story one piece at a time.

He gets better.

So why does it still hurt?

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Two weeks feels like a very long time.

It's only six Monday, Wednesday, and Fridays that he doesn't wait at the front doors of the school, but it still feels like a lifetime since he last sat on that front step, smiling fondly at the sound of an old sputtering truck engine approaching.

He watches movies alone, and cooks meals alone, and drives too and from the math lab alone, and it never felt this lonely before.

Karl asks. And maybe he already knows- maybe Sapnap told him and he's just trying to bait an answer out of George- but George stays quiet about that cool November day after football practice. He tells himself it's to prevent things from turning into an ordeal, because really, it's *not that big of a deal*. But another part of him says it's because he's scared. Scared to admit he cared, and got hurt and hasn't changed since those middle school years.

Eight days later, he does call his mother. He doesn't tell her about boys he might have been a little bit in love with, and other boys that made him cry and hurt and feel small. But he does apologize for overreacting before. And tells her his math scores are improving.

She invites him to come home for Thanksgiving dinner. He accepts.

Mondays and Wednesdays and Fridays pass and George finds that he can go sometimes hours at a time without thinking of Dream. He can laugh, and study, and lead practices.

But he doesn't delete the unread messages. And one night, he watches *Because of Winn Dixie* alone in the confines of his dark room.

He cries at the end.

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The weekend before the week of Thanksgiving, Dream plays his first game as starting quarterback.

The reminder on George's phone saying as much makes him jump, and he stares at it for a long time before swiping off. He forgot to delete it.

A part of George wishes he could just not go, but he knows he can't ditch the team like that. For them, he can at least pretend to be strong and composed.

So George gets dressed, eats a full breakfast, and goes to class as if it's any other ordinary day. When school is over- leaving a couple hours until the game- he fights the urge to nap, opting instead to drive over and help Quackity with his urgent math homework. Quackity only gets three problems done, but he makes George laugh- makes him forget his worries for a little bit. Makes him forget that tonight, whether he likes it or not, he's going to have to see Dream again.

He wonders if Dream is nervous. He wonders if he stayed up last night, unable to sleep, like he used to tell George would happen before big games.

He wonders if Dream is thinking about seeing him again. If Dream will be looking for him.

He hopes Dream will do well. That hope surprises him, but it's genuine, welling up in George's chest as he watches the football team jog out to the field, the wild, chanting crowd at their back.

He pinpoints Dream immediately. His gait is too familiar now. George can't take his eyes off him. If the new quarterback is nervous, he doesn't look it. He moves into position with confidence and ease, the rest of the players getting into formation around him.

The whistle blows. The ball is thrown. And the game begins.

The first half flies by without issue. George watches tensely as the both sides of the scoreboard inch up little by little, each team rising to meet each other time and time again. By halftime, Northview has a one point lead, and the team seems just as sure as ever that they will hold onto it, banking on cinching more points in the other two quarters.

Dream plays smart and safe as quarterback, which George can't help but think, isn't like him at all.

"So he is nervous," he murmurs to himself, taking a water break after finishing their halftime performance.

By the third quarter, Northview's resolve starts to crack. They let a touchdown in, trailing behind on the scoreboard at 20-27. Schlatt starts pacing.

The adoring fans in the stands grow anxious, muttering and shouting about bad referee calls and needing to get the lead before the fourth quarter.

Fourth quarter comes, and Northview crawls their way up the field for another touchdown, but misses what should be an easy field goal. George starts chewing on his nails nervously.

Two minutes left. One point down.

George feels shaky just watching. He leads another cheer pumping up the offense, and for once wishes he could go sit in the stands instead. He'd much rather be watching from up in the highest corner, tucked in a blanket with his friends. George watches Dream's every move, clenching his jaw every time he gets driven back before they can make a play up the field. They need him now. They need *something, anything* now.

The clock ticks down painstakingly slow. George wills it to move faster. For the game to be over with. He clenches and unclenches jittery fists.

Then... it happens.

George sees the opening just as Dream does... just as the rest of the crowd does. He can practically hear them hold their breath. The figure adorned in green darts up the field, one hand up for a pass, an opposing player hot on his tail trying to shove him out of bounds. Dream tracks the movement, backing up, trying to gauge if he can make the throw.

This is his chance. This is where he stops being scared, and finally goes for it. This is where he shows them all what he can do, what he's been prepared to do. But still, George can almost feel the hesitation in the way he dances back and forth, bobbing his head to try and see past the wall of

bodies. Why is he hesitating? Why is he afraid? He *can* do this. George knows he can.

“Now, Dream!” The shout tears out of him before he can think twice, holding both fists in the air encouragingly.

And really, above the roar of the crowd, and the sound of helmets and bodies colliding, no one should have been able to hear it. No one should have been able to pick out that one little holler.

So *why* is Dream turning?

Why is Dream looking at him?

George watches with a rising sense of panic and horror as Dream’s whole body deflates a little, the arm holding the football faltering from its place about to execute the throw. George shakes his head rapidly and shouts desperately for him to turn back around, but the damage has been done. Within seconds, Dream is pummeled from two different sides at once, knocked back to the ground with a sickening thud.

With a little over a minute on the clock, Dream has lost his first game.

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The team shuffles back to their locker room with heads hung low and shoulders hunched. The crowd is uncharacteristically quiet, people muttering and grimacing as they collect their things and head for the exits.

Schlatt follows the team silently. George wonders if they’ll get yelled at. If Dream will get yelled at. He feels apprehension and sorrow bubble in the pits of his stomach. He hopes not.

George also wonders if he should feel guilty for speaking up. For distracting Dream. But he knows... he knows anyone else would have been able to ignore that call. He knows that if Dream had been his usual self, he wouldn’t have hesitated on that throw in the first place. He’s not his usual self, and though George would like to pretend he doesn’t, he has a strong feeling as to why.

He wants to run. He wants to pack up his things without another thought and forget this night ever happened, the same way he forgot that *other* night ever happened. But something keeps him there. For ten... twenty minutes... keeps him anchored to that stadium, unable to leave. Karl and Sapnap find him, asking if he wants to go grab an ice cream to cheer themselves up, and he declines, saying he’s going to stay for a little while longer and talk to Wilbur.

He’s not going to talk to Wilbur.

He asks after Dream, and Sapnap grimaces and shrugs. “I didn’t see him in the locker room. Probably packed up and went home early. I can’t blame him,” he replies. “I’m gonna check in with him once I get home. I hope he’s doing okay.”

George nods numbly, thanking Sapnap and giving a weak wave as he and Karl disappear from view.

Despite the knowledge that Dream is probably long gone, and that there’s nothing he can do... George stays. Twenty-five, thirty minutes pass, and for some god forsaken reason he’s still there... knees curled under him, waiting for a familiar tall, blonde figure to leave.

He has no plan for if Dream actually turns up. Has no idea what he will say, or if Dream will even listen to him at all. But he stays.

Thirty... forty minutes.

Dream doesn't appear.

The fans leave. He sends Puffy and Wilbur on their way, assuring them his car is in working condition now and he won't get stranded like last time.

After forty-five minutes, George stands up, fully intending to call it a night and head towards his car. He fully intends to leave- that's the plan- so why is he walking towards the locker room?

His feet carry him there without thinking, pushing forward one step at a time even though there is immeasurable anxiety building in the pit of his stomach.

He has no obligation to check up on him. He knows. He knows he doesn't need to be here right now, and he doesn't need to see Dream okay before he goes home and he doesn't need to apologize for saying his name out on that field. But he's here nonetheless. He still walks through that unlocked door.

The locker room is empty by now- the only signs of life being a few wayward socks and a forgotten water bottle or two. George's footsteps echo off the tiles, making the whole space seem dead and eerie. He runs his hands along the cool metal lockers, wondering absentmindedly which one is Dream's.

He doesn't know what he expected to find. Dream in the middle of packing up, maybe? Or getting lectured by Schlatt, or getting consoled by a few teammates? George doesn't find any of those things.

It takes a few minutes of wandering before he picks up on the slightest sound of movement... the barely-there fluttering of one of the closed shower curtains. The culprit quiets just as quickly as they began, and George initially wonders if he imagined it.

He steps closer to the shower stall with light steps. The water isn't on, despite the curtain being drawn tightly across the front, obscuring the person inside from view. George can just barely see parts of the curled-up form peeking out from underneath the white material.

"Dream?" George starts carefully, and the figure intakes a sharp breath.

George knows it's him without even asking, but he does it anyway.

Dream shuffles ever so slightly further back from the opening, and George winces.

"It's me," he says, and can almost imagine Dream pressing his lips together and looking away.

He waits for a response that he knows isn't coming. Because maybe if he doesn't respond, George will leave him to his grief and embarrassment and shame.

And in the end... maybe that's for the best. Maybe this was all a bad idea to begin with and he should go home and leave this to Sapnap, and pretend he was never here in the first place.

George stands there for a quiet moment, then does just that. With a short nod, he turns back the way he came, taking one, two, three steps across echoing porcelain. Until something stops him.

*"Stay."*

Dream's raw, trembling voice comes as a surprise, making George pause mid-step, looking over

his shoulder.

Another word. Equally hesitant. Equally broken.

“Please.”

That’s all he needs to unsling the duffel from his shoulder, place it on one of the benches, and pad his way back to Dream. After a second of deliberation, George lowers himself to the floor beside the curtain, tucking his knees up and resting his chin atop them. He glances to the side, wondering if Dream is watching him through red, swollen eyes.

It feels familiar. He smiles sadly.

The silence stretches on for what feels like hours as George tries to find the right thing to say. Tries to sort out a mess of apologies, and condolences, and accusations, and encouragement that ultimately come out to him opening his mouth and shutting it again, the words dying in his throat.

Finally, he speaks. And his voice comes out small at first, bouncing off the walls and giving it an odd quality.

“I don’t know if you knew, but I’m colorblind.” He says, and it’s not at all what he expected but it somehow feels just right. His voice picks up in strength and volume. “Which is funny, because you talked about that whole traffic light thing once, and well, you’re right, it is a pain, but we can still tell them apart from the light.”

Dream doesn’t respond, but George thinks he might be smiling softly at that, chin tucked up against his arms.

“It was kinda dumb how we found out, actually. I was probably... I don’t know-” he pauses to count out the year on his fingers, “-Four? And I drew this picture, like all four year olds do... with the sun in the corner, and the grass, and flowers, and butterflies with smiley faces... except-” he laughs under his breath. “Except I ended up making all the grass and the leaves and trees red. And my mum, being, well, *my mum*, thought it was some sort of sign that I was disturbed, and took me to a child therapist to see if she had failed at raising me and turned me psychopathic.” George shrugs. “The therapist figured it out pretty quick. Turns out I was just red-green colorblind.”

Dream shifts ever so slightly closer, and George can hear his steady breathing. In... and out. In... and out. It’s soothing.

He continues. “Yeah, my mum has always been kind of like that. There was this one time, see, when she thought my brother had some rare illness in his internal organs that would leave him dead within a week, but really he had just eaten some of the cat’s food and gotten an upset stomach.” George shakes his head, grinning. “We still tease her for it, even now. She hates it, but she laughs with us anyways. We’re all a little bit like that. We pretend to hate each other’s guts, but in the end, we love each other a lot.”

They sit there like that for what feels like hours, with George rambling off random stories about his family, and eccentric school teachers, and childhood friends he hasn’t talked to in years. Dream listens silently, and George finds he doesn’t mind, simply glad to be in his presence again. It feels right.

He’s just finishing telling how he broke his wrist from falling off the monkey bars in primary school when the slow swish of fabric at his right makes him pause mid-word, the breath leaving his lungs.

The curtain is pushed aside, and suddenly Dream is right there, and all of a sudden George feels like he can't breathe. He's close enough that George can see the freckles across the bridge of his nose, and the scar on his chin from falling off a skateboard when he was eight. He's real, and vibrant, and a little worn down, and George doesn't know how to handle it.

Because Dream... Dream is just looking at him.

George feels like he is suspended in the air, his stomach waiting for the drop of plunging back to earth. Dream's eyes are warm, and open, and intense, and George feels like he's never been *seen* like this before. Never had someone look at him like he's the most wonderful, and interesting, and beautiful thing in the room. It's exhilarating, and terrifying and he doesn't know what to say. He just needs Dream to stop looking at him *like that*, so he can breathe again and maybe come up with a coherent way to respond.

Dream doesn't.

Instead he searches every line of George's face as if he's memorizing it, drinking in every inch like he's seeing him for the first time.

And then Dream's arms are wrapped around him, pulling him in.

George gasps, planting one hand on the tile to brace himself as he falls into the embrace. The position is awkward, and his wrist hurts from smacking against the hard tile, and he doesn't care, clutching the other man to him and after a moment, rubbing soothing circles into his back. Dream mumbles choked apologies into his neck, repeating the words over and over and over like a prayer.

George whispers assurances and runs his fingers through the tangled, greasy knots of his hair, and the hurt inside finally untwists itself, just a little bit.

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They fall back into a routine that's all the same and entirely different as it used to be. They study, and eat dinner, and watch movies together, but now it's with Karl and Quackity and Bad, and sometimes even Callahan. They drive in separate cars now, but don't hesitate to be near each other... the space on the couch dwindling to nothing as thighs press against thighs and shoulders lean on shoulders. Dream looks at him with soft eyes and speaks with a soft tone, and sometimes accidentally brushes him with soft hands and George marvels how it was ever any different. George unabashedly wonders if his lips are soft too.

At some point they convince Karl that Sapnap doesn't want to hold his hand and spend time with him "as bros," and the two finally go on their first official date after months of thinly veiled "hang outs." George sends Karl off with a giddy hug, and a teasing message for Sapnap to "take good care of him, and have him home before one a.m. -or else." Karl laughs and promises to pass on the message.

Dream and George study alone that night, and it's quiet, but comfortable. They order takeout- too exhausted to cook- and George doesn't even finish his meal before he's asleep on the table, cheap wooden chopsticks still in hand.

Dream chuckles under his breath, putting the food and the chopsticks back in the fridge and waking up George just long enough to hoist him into his arms and carry him to the couch. George complies blearily, wrapping his arms around Dream's neck and resting his head against his chest. Dream mumbles something about saving homework for another day and tucks a pillow under George's head. George nods in hazy agreement, already feeling himself drift off.

In the moments before unconsciousness, he feels a blanket settle over his shoulders, and a soft caress against his cheek.

It's gone before George can even process it, but he smiles nonetheless, skin still tingling.

#### Chapter End Notes

Come brain-rot with me on Twitter if you'd like [here!](#)

## Chapter 6

### Chapter Summary

“Seriously don’t feel bad,” he insists, recognizing the look on Dream's face immediately. “Maybe I’ll go out for lunch with my brother and his girlfriend or something. It will be fine. Plus I’ve got lots of Christmas movies to binge.” George smiles, trying to convince him that his feelings aren’t hurt.

Dream seems to consider this for a moment, before continuing. “Well, what if you just came home with me?”

George nearly chokes on his food, blinking hard. “What?”

### Chapter Notes

So sorry for the late update folks! I was working on some other writing projects and have been trying to not fall behind in uni, so this chapter took a while. I'm in my last month of school here, with a lot of finals coming up, so I can't promise another quick update, but know that I will still try to work on this whenever I can, and I fully intend to finish it.

Hope you enjoy this chapter! Let me know your thoughts in the comments. :)

Thanks to @skiggswastaken on Twitter for beta-ing!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Whatever straggling fragments of George’s sleep schedule remained before Thanksgiving, fall to pieces the weeks leading up to finals. It feels like he lives in a prison of textbooks, test reviews, and lectures.

He’s not the only one suffering either.

Most of the group chat becomes filled with lamentations from his friends... long winded texts about dropping out of school, or asking for explanations of complicated formulas. They help each other the best they can, supplying online flashcards and library resources between dull, hasty meals, and endlessly long classes.

Mixing things up a little, instead of Dream tutoring George with math, George begins to take one night a week to help his friend prepare for his biology final.

“Are you sure you don’t need to work on your homework?” Dream questions for the third time that night. “Your test is sooner than mine.”

George taps his pencil against Dream’s worksheet again. “Nope, I’m good,” he insists. “Believe it or not, I’m actually feeling relatively prepared due to your weeks of servitude. I can’t thank you



enough.”

Dream chuckles, resting his chin in his hand. “At least you know you’d be doomed without me,” he says smugly and George elbows him.

“Maybe so, but *you’re* gonna be the one doomed unless you stop talking and let me get through this problem,” he says.

Dream blows out a puff of air, settling back in his seat. “Remind again why you can’t just take the final in my place? That would solve all our problems.”

George raises an eyebrow, not looking up from the diagram. “Oh yeah, because we look *so* similar. They wouldn’t be able to tell the difference.”

Dream folds his arms, tipping his chair back and forth. “We really do. I’m tall. You’re... okay well you’re definitely not tall-”

“Shut up-”

“And we both have green eyes.”

George pauses to shoot Dream an unimpressed look. “My eyes aren’t green.”

Dream shrugs. “How would you know? You’re colorblind.”

“And you’re an idiot.”

“At least I’m an idiot that can tell our uniforms don’t look like a shit stain.”

George lets out a noise of disgust, and Dream laughs when he gives him a hard shove.

“I’ll leave. I’ll walk out and leave you to fail this class and lose your scholarship,” George threatens, jutting out his chin.

Dream, in turn, throws his arms around George’s neck, pulling him into his chest and sighing dramatically. “No you won’t. You love me too much.”

George tries to break free with no avail, muttering curses under his breath. “You’re unbearable is what you are.”

“And you like it.”

“I like it when you shut the hell up,” George counters, finally wiggling out of his grip.

“Fine. I’ll stop talking if you agree to take me to McDonalds after this,” Dream says coyly.

“No, you’ll stop talking because you’re never going to finish this assignment on your own, and then you’ll pay for both of our nuggets as a thank you.”

“Even better. Brilliant idea. Truly one of your best, George.”

“I know,” George replies, smiling to himself. “Now hurry up and pay attention. We don’t have all night.”

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The next day, George ends up falling asleep in the locker room after cheer practice, shoes halfway on.

Practices have been merciless on him as of late, between the need to get routines cemented for competitions in a little over a month, and running on hardly any sleep due to studying. Puffy berates him for it, saying he's not going to pass his finals or be any help at practice if he's pulling all-nighters several times a week, but he simply nods in agreement then proceeds to do the same thing all over again.

Karl and Niki take their fair share of embarrassing pictures before waking him up, asking if he's gonna make it home or fall asleep at the wheel.

George rubs his eyes and says he'll be fine, before trying to snatch away their phones and delete the pictures. After five minutes of darting between the lockers and shutting themselves in bathroom stalls, George finally surrenders, standing with arms folded as Karl and Niki step out, laughing.

He calls Miles on the way home, asking which finals he remembers being the hardest, and his brother stays on call with him while he goes through each class, offering his input for each.

Two days before the first test, George organizes a study session with Dream, Bad, Skeppy, and Callahan, telling them all to bring their materials to work on.

To no one's surprise, Quackity Facetimes them half way through with an outraged, "Oh I see... leaving me out of the smart kids club, I get it! Well I never wanted to help you all anyways!"

"Sorry Q, this was a STEM only session, I didn't think you'd be interested," George replies through an exasperated grin. "We'll definitely hit you up tomorrow when we're working on history stuff."

"STEM?" Quackity makes a gagging sound. "Disgusting."

"Precisely why I didn't invite you."

Quackity scoffs. "Mhm, because you hate me. Yeah I'm onto you George. You're such an asshole, you know that right? You're discriminating against people who hate math and I will not stand for it."

Dream leans over to get in the corner of the frame. "If you can recite the quadratic formula by memory you can come," he says.

"Oh fuck that," Quackity replies. And Bad interjects a quick, "*Language.*" Quackity continues. "You know, Dream? You're a real bad guy, I hope you realize that. Constantly forcing *my best friend* to hang out with you? It's pathetic, really. Cruel and unusual punishment."

"Your best friend?" Dream asks incredulously. "Since when was George-"

"No, he's got a point, Dream," George says, feigning sincerity. "I mean, I'd much rather watch movies with Quackity, but when you get on your knees and cry every time I try to leave, I just feel bad for you and can't do it."

Dream gapes at him. "What- I do not-!"

"Yeah, yeah, make all the excuses you want, Dream. We know the truth," Quackity chimes in.

"That's pretty messed up, dude," Skeppy adds, shaking his head from across the table.

Dream throws his hands up in irritation. "You're all a bunch of idiots."

"Takes one to know one, asshole!" Quackity says, flipping off the camera before hanging up.

"One of these days..." Dream says with an eye roll and George snickers under his breath.

The first final arrives in what feels like an instant, and George tries not to make himself sick with nervousness. He barely managed to eat his measly breakfast an hour earlier, lacking any appetite. He doesn't remember being this nervous for finals week before. Surely they had been equally horrible in previous years, but he can barely sleep this go around. He presses on though, relishing in the feeling of relief as he exits the testing center a few hours later. "One down. A million to go."

The rest come easier after that, though equally draining.

George pushes through the last week of class in a haze, his brain muddled from all the assorted facts and formulas bouncing around his skull. But one by one, he finishes the tests off, clearing a hopeful path towards Christmas Break.

George has hardly even thought about Christmas, with all the stress of the past month, and does a double take when Jack mentions it's a little under two weeks away. He absentmindedly wonders where he'll go for Christmas, as his parents are going to be away on vacation with Jane and her kids. No one else in the family was invited this year. Maybe he and Karl will have their own little Christmas party, making homemade caramels and watching Hallmark movies.

But Karl, as it turns out, is going up to New York to visit his grandparents over most of the break. He nearly asks his friend to take him along, but thinks better of it. Their family already has six kids to wrangle onto that eight hour drive- they don't need another person taking up space.

After asking around, George finds that Bad is heading home to see his parents, along with Sapnap. Quackity tells him he has plans with some other friends both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, but tells him he's welcome to come along.

George lets out a sigh and politely declines, the idea of going partying with a bunch of strangers sounding ultimately more taxing than enjoyable.

So that just leaves...

Right.

George feels weird asking Dream if he wants to spend Christmas together. He can't really pinpoint why, because they do everything together at this point anyways, and it's not like he's uncomfortable being alone with him. But something about it feels more intimate, feels weird intruding upon the time you reserve for family, or a significant other.

But George really doesn't want to be alone for the holidays.

He brings it up while they are out to lunch one day. They both only have one day of testing left, and their spirits are high, conversation coming light and easy.

*"The worst he can do is say no,"* George reminds himself, eyeing Dream across the table. He forges ahead.

"Hey Dream."

Dream rips open a new package of napkins, not looking up. "What's up?"

George fiddles with the little salt packets at the end of the table. “Are you, uh- doing anything over the break? Like for Christmas?”

Dream nods, taking a sip of his drink, and George’s heart sinks a little.

“Yeah, I’m headed home to stay with my mom and my sister. It’s funny, they only live like an hour out from here, but I feel like I never see them. It will be nice.” Dream smiles fondly. “Why do you ask? Are you visiting family too?”

George swallows hard, trying not to look too disappointed. “Oh um- no. They’re off on vacation. I was just going to ask if you wanted to do something together if you weren’t busy. But it’s no problem.”

Dream’s eyebrows furrow slightly.

“Seriously don’t feel bad,” he insists, recognizing the look on his face immediately. “Maybe I’ll go out for lunch with my brother and his girlfriend or something. It will be fine. Plus I’ve got lots of Christmas movies to binge.” George smiles, trying to convince him that his feelings aren’t hurt.

Dream seems to consider this for a moment, before continuing. “Well, what if you just came home with me?”

George nearly chokes on his food, blinking hard. “What?”

Dream nods, expression sincere. “Yeah, It would be tons of fun! We have plenty of room, and I’m sure my mom would be happy to have you.”

...Him. Going home with Dream. For Christmas. With his family.

What the hell is he supposed to say to that??

On one hand, it feels entirely inappropriate, and surely he would be a burden, and *doesn’t Dream realize the implications of this ??*

But on the other...

Drinking hot cocoa, and making gingerbread houses, and watching dumb movies snuggled up on the couch with Dream... well it sure beats doing it alone.

“You’re sure your family won’t mind?” He asks carefully, weighing his options.

“Positive,” Dream replies confidently, a sparkle of excitement in his eye. “I just know they’ll love you. Oh! And you can meet Patches, and I’ll show you all the old places I used to ride my bike around town, and-”

George stares at his unfinished sandwich, Dream’s words nonsensical in his ears. Two thoughts keep repeating in his head, louder than Dream’s enthusiastic rambling.

One: *He’s going home with Dream for Christmas.*

Two: *This could be very, very bad .*

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“I’ll warn you, they can be a little much,” Dream announces, bouncing a ping pong ball against the wall of the dorm room as George attempts to zip his suitcase.

"I've got a billion siblings, I'm sure it will be fine," George huffs, trying to get a stray shirt unstuck from its place jammed in the zipper. He's been at this for two hours now, agonizing over what he might possibly need to bring along. Surely the Bennetts have flashlights, but what if a random hurricane hits, and they're all out of batteries? He's really just trying to be prepared. Oh, batteries! He should probably stop by the store and grab a package before heading out.

Dream didn't even have the decency to send him a warning text before showing up at his apartment, insisting he was bored and wanted to keep George company while he packed.

"You had better not distract me. I'm trying to be productive," George had said, and Dream merely smirked and replied with a smug little, "Oh you find me distracting, George?"

He did keep his word though, allowing George to go about his business while he finds ways to entertain himself. George isn't sure where he got the ping pong ball, but hey, it works.

"Yeah, but your siblings are probably all proper and British," Dream says, and George scoffs.

"Proper? That's not the word I would use. Uptight maybe. And boring."

"Sounds British to me."

George pushes away the obnoxious strand of hair hanging in front of his eyes. He needs to cut it. Damn, he really ought to schedule an appointment before he leaves. Great. Just another thing on the list of to-do's. "Are you calling me uptight and boring then?"

A smile plays across Dream's lips and he shrugs. "You said it, not me."

George attempts to snatch the ping pong ball out of the air, but Dream is too quick. George shakes his head and goes back to his luggage, freeing the shirt with one more hard tug. "So you're saying your family is just full of crazy Florida people with pet alligators and a warrant out for each of your arrests?"

Dream laughs. "Not quite, but I wouldn't put it past them. I definitely got into a lot of crazy shit like that as a kid."

George hums with a raised eyebrow as he adds a few more pairs of socks, just in case. "Oooh, you were a trouble maker huh?"

"Yeah, a little. I got the cops called on me for skipping school once. I nearly got away too, but I tripped on a curb and skinned my knee so they managed to catch up. My mom was *not* happy after that one." Dream chuckles lightly. "She still bandaged up my knee though once I got home. That's just how she is. No matter how bad I screwed up, she was always there waiting to fix me up."

George smiles softly. "She sounds pretty great."

Dream nods. "She is." He catches the ping pong ball and turns it over in his hands. "She deserves an award for putting up with me and Drista all these years. We're quite a handful."

"You? A handful? I can't imagine," George smirks, and Dream throws the ball at him. It bounces off his wrist and he giggles.

Dream crosses the room, hoisting himself onto George's bed and leaning back, arms tucked behind his head. George has to shift the suitcase so his gangly legs don't push it off. Dream trills a few times, eyes drifting around the room lazily before speaking.

"I take it you were probably the perfect child?" He asks inquisitively, tracing the light indentations of the ceiling in the air with his finger. "The nice, quiet one that doesn't cause any problems and gets good grades and makes everyone happy?"

George quirks his lips in a frown. The comment has no malice behind it, he knows, but it worms its way beneath his skin. He gives a hard shove to the contents of his suitcase, trying to make them fit. "Not exactly."

Dream tilts his head up with a curious glance. "No?"

George's hand curls around the fabric of a folded hoodie, squeezing it tightly then releasing. He pulls away. "No." Quiet steeps into the space, buzzing in his ears and tugging at the words in his belly.

"Maybe at first, but I... I disappointed them pretty quickly."

He smiles grimly, finding Dream already looking at him, pushed up onto his elbows. He opens and closes his mouth a few times, seemingly wanting to console him in some way, but not finding the words.

George feels vaguely guilty. He doesn't want to make him uncomfortable, but hey, this is what friends do right? They take turns spilling tales of their childhood trauma like it's spin the bottle, eager to give and take and learn and share.

Or maybe not. George hasn't always been the best at making friends.

But with Dream looking at him like that, hands folded quietly in his lap, eyes open and concerned, he feels equally bad just shutting down now. He can trust Dream. He knows it. At least, he thinks he does.

"Are you gonna scooch over or what, asshole?" George finally mutters fondly, pushing Dream's legs out of the way.

Dream gives an awkward laugh before quickly moving over and pulling his knees up to his chest. "Oh! Of course. Sorry."

George curls into the space beside him, already feeling a sense of ease wash over him at the warmth of Dream's shoulders brushing his. Dream has always had that thing about him. It's like just being in the same room as him calms your worries, just a little bit.

He waits for George to speak, fiddling with his fingers, then smoothing them back out over his faded jeans. George swallows hard, trying to keep his gaze fixed firmly ahead of him, where he's flexing and unflexing his feet hanging off the edge of the mattress.

*Trust.*

"I was ten years old when I told my brother I had a crush on a boy in my class."

There it is.

The memory isn't new. He's recounted it before, but the way it shatters the silence is terrifying, making George's hands go clammy and his muscles tense up. It feels ten times more nerve-racking this time than any other.

He chances a glance over at Dream, whose eyebrows are raised in surprise. He doesn't laugh

though, or grimace. His expression is serious, almost thoughtful. Surprised, but not shocked. Not disgusted. Not afraid.

That's something, at least.

He barrels on, and the words come easier now that the first part is out, slipping off his tongue.

"My brother, Miles... he was around sixteen at the time. And for some reason I got stuck hearing about this girl he was having problems at school. I loved secrets, loved when my siblings trusted me with secrets, but he wouldn't tell me her name. I kept asking and asking and he stood his ground so finally I said we could switch. The name of my little crush for his. It seemed easy enough." George pauses, shaking his head ever so slightly. He isn't sure if he imagines the way Dream leans up closer to him, providing silent comfort.

"If I had known better, I would have just kept it to myself, and it might have all been fine. If I had known better I would have made up some easy, unassuming name like... like Emily, or... or Sarah, or literally *any* girl's name on the entire fucking planet and Miles would have been none the wiser." He hesitates, pushing the heels of his hands into the bedspread.

"...But you didn't. Didn't know better, that is," Dream supplies carefully, voice soft.

George blinks hard, refocusing. He continues.

"No. I didn't know. And I... I just did it. I told him. I went and ruined everything in a matter of seconds." He takes in a sharp breath, shaking his head in disbelief. "In a matter of *seconds* I went from being the most unproblematic, happy little ten year old in the world to... I don't know... the Vincent family's dirty little secret."

George knows his words are dripping with bitterness, sparking out of his mouth like there's fire in his belly. He knows Dream might be afraid of him like this, voice low, nails digging into the palms of his hands. He doesn't care. Let him be afraid. Let him run. If they are nothing but a lit fuse waiting to reach the bomb, George wants it to catch. Here. Now.

"What was his name?" Dream asks, and it's so gentle that it makes George stop in his tracks, the fire inside spitting, crackling, then smoldering.

People don't normally ask that.

He thinks back to a small classroom in Brighton with yellow walls and wooden desks and a dark haired teacher with a too-bright smile.

And a boy.

"Teddy," George almost whispers. "His name was Teddy."

Dream smiles softly... and with slow movements, unfurls George's clenched fists with calloused fingers. "Tell me about him."

The action feels so strangely intimate, it makes George's chest tighten, ribs shrinking over his beating heart. He takes in a shuddering breath, watching as Dream brushes his thumb over the tiny red crescents.

"He... he had curly red hair. And so many freckles," George starts, closing his eyes. "I had never seen hair like that. He sat in front of me, and I would just sit there staring at it, wondering what it would be like to touch it. One time I did, just barely, while we were in line, and he turned around

and caught me,” George feels the hint of a laugh catch in his breath. “I was so nervous. I thought he’d be mad, or think I was weird. But... he didn’t.”

Dream leans his head on George’s shoulder, and for a moment, he freezes, forgetting how to function. Then Dream is playing with his fingers again, mumbling a light, “What did he do?”

George clears his throat, speaking up once again.

“He giggled. I had never heard him giggle, but it was so bright and beautiful, it gave me butterflies in my stomach. I had never felt butterflies like that. I think I knew then. I mean, I didn’t *know* then, but that was the beginning, I guess,” George says, and for some reason, it doesn’t feel all that scary talking about anymore. “He asked me my name, and I said I liked his hair, and he said he liked my shoes, and then we were friends. It was nice, back then. Simple.”

“It sounds nice,” Dream hums.

George doesn’t tell him how his parents stopped letting Teddy come over to play after that conversation. Or how they asked his teacher to move their desks. Or how Miles stopped telling him secrets. Or how he overheard his mother crying to his father one night, asking through tears where she went wrong. Those things he keeps buried in deep, hidden places where he can pretend to forget about them.

Dream doesn’t ask, and he’s grateful.

Instead, he sits with him in easy silence for a long time, tracing over the creases in his palms.

And it’s enough.

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George isn’t sure what he was expecting when they knocked on the door to Dream’s house but it isn’t this.

He’s inside, suitcase in hand, watching wide eyed as a blonde-haired teenage girl locks the door on Dream and sits against it, laughing hysterically as he bangs on the other side.

“You let me in now you little prick!” Dream shouts, voice muffled through the door and the girl only laughs harder, peeking through the peep-hole.

George hears someone shuffle in from the other room and gulps, unsure of what to do with himself.

“Mooom... Dream called me a prick,” the girl calls, and a woman, presumably Dream’s mother, appears from around the corner, rolling her eyes. She has short blonde hair, brushing just past her jaw, and is wearing an apron over the top of her rusty brown- or maybe orange- sweater. The smile lines, the strong nose, the bright, intuitive eyes all speak of Dream.

“Dream, say sorry to your sister,” the woman says, and George can imagine the way Dream scoffs on the other side.

“She- are you kidding?? She locked me out!” He shouts, and George laughs under his breath.

“And if you want to come back in, you better make this fast,” she counters, a smile playing on her face. “Because I’ve got dinner cooking on the stove, and I’m not afraid to leave you two to your own devices.”



The girl- Drista, was it?-snickers. “Dinner huh? I bet you’re hungry, Dream. It’s really a shame you’ll miss it. I guess me and George will just have to eat your portion.”

George starts at the sound of his name, looking up in surprise. Dream’s mother casts him an apologetic, yet amused look.

Dream is quiet for a few more seconds, giving the door a light kick before muttering an exasperated. “I’m sorry.”

Drista cracks open the door. “For what?” She chides, and Dream wedges his way in before she can close it.

“For calling you a prick.” He says, then adds a just barely audible, “ *even though you are one .*”

Drista gives him a gentle kick to the shins and Dream nudges her with his elbow. Then, as if suddenly noticing George standing awkwardly in the entryway, he blushes in embarrassment, straightening up to go stand by him.

“Shit, I mean- shoot, I’m sorry George,” he sputters, rubbing his neck. “This was not- I swear we’re not always like this.”

“Dream, let’s not lie to our guest,” another voice chimes in, and George finds Dream’s mother approaching, placing one hand on her son’s shoulder. He towers over her, but George gets the sense that she’s easily the one in charge.

Dream groans. “Can we just pretend to be normal for like five minutes?”

Drista grabs one of George’s bags, beginning to haul it up the stairs. “Nope,” she says, disappearing from sight.

“Hi, George. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. We’re glad you can come stay with us,” Dream’s mother says, with a warm smile. “Things can get a little crazy, but I think you’ll like it here. And I promise that I did not raise my kids to be like this, they went feral all on their own.”

Dream lets out an indignant, “ Hey! ” and she laughs.

“You can call me Julie, by the way,” she adds, reaching out to shake George’s hand.

George takes it, hoping he doesn’t look nervous. “It’s nice to meet you too. Thank you so much for having me. I hope it’s not a bother.”

Julie waves him off. “No, of course not. We love visitors. Besides, we’ve heard all about you- it’s nice for us to finally be able to put a name to a face.”

George tilts his head slightly, glancing over at Dream. “You’ve heard all about me?” He asks curiously, and Dream flushes.

“Well-” he starts, but Drista comes bounding back down the stairs.

“Oh yeah. He literally never stops talking about you, George,” she says, and Dream makes a sort of choking noise. “It’s honestly kind of annoying. Not that you’re annoying, I’m just saying that I’ll be trying to ask Dream a coding question or something and somehow it always turns into ‘ *Oh, that reminds me of a joke George told me, ’* and, ‘ *George used to do that too, he told me at lunch the other day,* ’ and-”

Dream claps a hand over her mouth before she can continue.

“She’s exaggerating,” he says desperately, before exclaiming in disgust and pulling his hand back.

“I don’t exaggerate,” Drista says calmly, as Dream wipes his hand down his pants.

“You licked me!”

“You covered my mouth.”

“You’re making me look like a total weirdo!”

“Because you are one. Oh which reminds me George, there was this one time where he-”

Julie rolls her eyes, placing both hands on Drista’s shoulders and giving her a gentle squeeze.

“Alright, alright, Drista, let’s not overwhelm our guest too quickly,” she says, guiding her out of the front entryway. “Why don’t you come help me with dinner while Dream and George settle in.”

Drista sighs. “Sure, whatever,” she says reluctantly. “Banish me for speaking the truth, I get it.”

“It’s not the truth,” Dream says quickly to George, who raises his eyebrows doubtfully.

Once Drista and Julie have disappeared into the other room, George grabs his remaining bags and starts towards the stairs, Dream following suit.

“It sounds like you’re pretty obsessed with me, Dream,” he says innocently, hearing Dream stumble slightly behind him.

“Haha, very funny,” Dream replies, trying to brush it off. “She... says some weird things sometimes.”

“Sounds like you were the one saying weird things,” George teases. “What’s next, are you gonna confess your undying love for me?”

Dream’s footsteps behind him stop entirely this time, and George glances over his shoulder.

Dream swallows hard. “Good one,” he manages, laughing weakly. George gives him an incredulous look before continuing.

“Yeah. Anyways, you’re going to have to show me where to go from here. I’m not quite sure where Drista put my bag.”

\*\*\*\*\*

George isn’t sure why it didn’t cross his mind that he and Dream would be sleeping in the same room. He shouldn’t have been surprised at seeing the extra sleeping pad laid out neatly beside Dream’s bed, shouldn’t have felt a sort of thrill at the sight... but he is surprised, and he does feel his stomach flip flop a little bit.

And the thing is, George has been to sleepovers before, in his youth and adult years, so why does this feel different? He’s not sure how to sort out the fluttery feeling of anticipation, and anxiety building in him at the idea of falling asleep and waking up next to Dream for two whole weeks. Having a room to themselves. It feels like there’s some sort of forbidden implication to it all that was never there when he and Karl had fallen asleep under a mess of blankets in George’s living room in front of a movie.

Either Dream isn't phased by the concept, or he's hiding it well, as he begins to unpack his things, shoving clothes into drawers and closets.

Dream's room is exactly, and not at all what George expected. The framed high school football jersey above the bed doesn't surprise George in the slightest, and he bites his tongue at any comments about how tacky it might look. On top of that, he has a signed football on the dresser, along with a slew of assorted medals and trophies that George can't make out.

But there are other things. A disorganized wall of photos with people George doesn't recognize- some of the pictures depicting Dream as a child, some more recent. A pile of blankets formed into a sort of nest, caving in in the center.

Stranger still is the corner, where the paint doesn't match the off white of the rest of the room. Green vines snake out from the floorboards, twisting and stretching towards the ceiling. Flowers of all kinds bloom from some of the tips, boasting soft, rounded petals and curling leaves. George wishes he had brought his colorblind glasses to see them all properly. The mural is beautiful in its chaos, and George trails over to it, running his fingers along the paint brush marks.

"Who made this?" He asks curiously.

Dream looks up. "Oh. I did."

"You paint?"

Dream makes a face. "Not exactly. It was- well it's kind of a weird story actually."

George settles himself onto the floor in the corner, cross-legged. "I'm all ears."

Dream hangs up one last shirt debating for a moment before sitting on the edge of his bed, eyeing the mural with a faraway look. "It's not all that interesting," he prefaces, but George urges him on anyway with a tilt of his head.

Dream shrugs. "Well if you insist." He tugs at a strand of hair at the base of his neck absentmindedly. "I started it when I was fourteen after my mom stuck me in therapy for the first time. They said I needed an outlet. I tried a lot of different things that never really worked, and initially this was one of them." He raises his eyebrows, letting out a sigh. "I didn't particularly like painting- thought it was boring- and I wasn't good at it. But after a while I found I almost *liked* how boring it could be. How still. Things like writing put me in my own head too much, and I didn't feel like doing sports at the time because... well-yeah, I just didn't." Dream looks vaguely uncomfortable for a moment, but brushes it off. "Anyways, just sitting in here and slapping random shit on my wall was just so perfectly neutral. I needed something like that. I also liked that it pissed my mom off a little bit- painting whatever I wanted over my walls- but there was nothing she could do about it because hey, doctors orders."

"The rebellious streak returns," George comments, and Dream grins.

"Yes, there it is again." He laughs. "I added the flowers later, towards the end of high school. All the random green squiggles were becoming an eyesore, but I couldn't force myself to get rid of them- sentimental value or something like that."

George looks back up at the painting. "Well I think it's beautiful. You're pretty good."

Dream smiles. "Not really, but thank you. It's... nice, I think."

"Very," George replies. "Not quite what I expected to find in your room, but I think it's lovely."

“And what did you expect?” Dream asks curiously.

George trails back to his suitcase, starting to unpack a few things. “Oh I don’t know. A whole lot of football memorabilia. Probably some dirty socks.”

Dream punches his shoulder lightly. “Hey, just because I play football, that doesn’t make me some stereotypical frat boy who doesn’t know how to do his own laundry.”

“You have a jersey hanging over your bed. And you brought a bag of dirty clothes with us.”

“I’ll have you know my mom put that jersey up,” Dream insists.

“Yeah, just like she’ll be doing your laundry,” George counters, smiling smugly, and Dream throws his hands in the air in frustration.

“I can do my own fucking laundry, George,” he exclaims.

“Sure you can,” George replies innocently, and Dream tosses a T-shirt at his face.

“You know, I’m starting to regret inviting you.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Despite only having four people at the table, dinner is... well... *loud*. George doesn’t know how else to put it.

Family dinners at the Vincent house had always been a time to appreciate each other’s presence, taking turns speaking and updating each other on their lives. Words flowed quietly and calmly, and you only interrupted to ask for someone to pass the salt.

Dream’s family treats dinner like a celebration. There’s already music blaring on an old CD player as they enter the kitchen, unfamiliar show tunes filling George’s ears. Drista is dancing past her mother as they set the table, both of them belting out the lyrics over the top of each other.

Dream smiles at the sight, his eyes crinkling. He watches for a little bit before announcing his presence, voicing a loud, “What’s for dinner?” and entering the room.

George follows, a little out of his element, but eager to join the warm environment.

Dream turns down the music a little and Drista whines. “Just during dinner,” he assures. “I want to catch up and be able to actually hear you guys.”

“Okay, okay,” Drista replies, taking her seat at the table. “But you have to promise to turn it back on and dance with me later- Mom is a terrible partner.”

Julie gapes. “Excuse you, I am a wonderful dancer!” She insists, resting one hand on her hip. “I used to do ballroom, you know.”

“We know,” Dream and Drista chorus back, making George chuckle under his breath.

Julie rolls her eyes, carrying a bowl of mashed potatoes over to the table. “Well, George didn’t know. I’m sure he’d be very interested to hear about my *extensive* background in dance. Isn’t that right, George?”

George nods, grinning shyly. “Of course. I’ve always thought ballroom dancing looked fun, but never tried it.”

“You kiss-up,” Dream mutters light-heartedly as his mother beams.

“George, you don’t have to say yes, it’ll just boost her ego and send her on a tangent,” Drista sighs, earning a sharp look from Julie.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she scolds lightly. “I was just trying to be friendly.”

“I appreciate it, Drista, but I really was interested,” George replies, heading to the sink to wash his hands. Dream groans.

“Alright, but let’s save your stories for later, okay Mom?” He pleads. “I’m sure we’d all love to hear them after we’ve all eaten.”

“Fine, fine. Hurry on over here then. The food’s getting cold anyways.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Hours later, after peach cobbler, several games of Clue, and a song and dance session that George observes in quiet amusement from the couch, everyone parts ways, wishing each other goodnight.

Between the excitement of the day, and the stress of the previous week, George feels tired to the bone, barely able to keep his eyes open.

He goes through the motions of brushing his teeth and using the restroom, nearly nodding off while washing his hands. When he exits the bathroom, Dream is already under his covers, yawning. George tries to stay quiet in case Dream is asleep as he slips into his sleeping bag, sighing in relief as his head hits the pillow.

He’s nearly out cold when he hears Dream roll over, voice filling the comfortable silence.

“George?”

“Yeah?”

Dream pauses, and George initially thinks he might have drifted off. But the soft rumble of his voice fills the space once again.

“I’m... I’m really glad you’re here,” he says gently, and George feels warmth spread through him, down to the very tips of his fingers. He buries his face further into the pillow.

“I’m glad I’m here too.”

From where his face is peeking out above his comforter, Dream smiles.

“Goodnight, George.”

“Goodnight, Dream.”

Maybe this wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

## Chapter End Notes

Follow me on [Twitter](#) for updates and more random ramblings.



## Chapter 7

### Chapter Summary

She tilts her head to one side, pushing the shake forward and out of her way. “So...”

George gulps. “Um... how’s scho-”

“You like my brother don’t you?”

George nearly chokes mid-drink, pounding at his chest a few times and gasping for air. “Excuse me?”

### Chapter Notes

And we're back! Thank you guys for all your support with this fic! I have loved reading all your wonderful comments- they're such a huge motivator. This little Christmas arc has been so fun to write. We'll be finishing the arc up next chapter with some of my favorite scenes :)

As usual thanks to @skiggsbastaken for beta-ing!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George wakes up to the sound of a door slamming open, quick steps passing by his sleeping mat to jump onto Dream’s bed.

“Wake up !” Drista calls shaking her brother awake, who merely groans in response. “It’s like noon already, why are you two still asleep?”

George blinks blearily at the clock, which reads 12:18 p.m., then down at the mussed pile of blankets at the foot of Dream’s bed. Curled up within them is a cat, sleeping contently.

“*Patches*,” his brain supplies, and he grins.

It’s not unusual for him to sleep in this late, or later. He’s never been a morning person. Apparently, this will simply not do for Drista.

“Go away,” Dream moans, rolling over and swatting at Drista. “And lower your voice.”

“Aw, does the poor baby need his beauty sleep?” Drista taunts, and George smiles through a yawn. Drista continues her attempts at pulling the covers off of a very perturbed Dream. “We have things to get done lazy-bones, c’mon. I want to go Christmas shopping before dinner.”

“We’ve got like, two whole weeks for that,” Dream mumbles, shivering as Drista finally strips his blankets back.

Drista sighs loudly. “Just because you procrastinate getting gifts until the day before every single

year, doesn't mean I want to."

"Then drive yourself."

"I'm fourteen."

"The cops don't know that."

Drista hits him with a pillow and George snickers. She glances down at him with a smirk. "George wants to go shopping." She raises her eyebrows as if to say "*just go with it.*"

"No he doesn't," Dream says, rubbing his face and finally sitting up. "George wants to go back to sleep and have you stop bothering us, right?"

George rests both arms behind his head, shrugging. "I don't know, Christmas shopping could be fun."

Drista cackles and gives Dream a hard shove back into his pillows. "Told ya!" She gloats, heading back out of the room with a skip in her step. "You both have twenty minutes to eat and get ready, then we're leaving. Don't be late."

The door shuts behind her, leaving them alone in peaceful silence once again.

"What the hell," Dream says, rolling over so he's facing George- chin resting against his fist. "Why'd you encourage her?"

George shrugs, trying to tear his gaze away from the expanse of Dream's bare chest and arms, catching the light of the sun streaming through the blinds.

"You were supposed to take my side," Dream complains lightheartedly, face twisted in a pout.

"No way was I gonna betray my favorite Bennett sibling," George counters with a sly smile, leading Dream to toss a pillow at his head.

"Not cool," he snorts.

George grabs the pillow and hugs it to his chest. "It's not my fault that your sister is so much better than you in every way."

"I guess I might as well just stay here then. Don't want to ruin George and Drista bonding time with my ultimate lameness," Dream says dramatically, flopping back onto the bed.

"How honorable of you," George replies, unable to resist reaching up to pat Dream's stubbly cheek before getting up and grabbing a change of clothes from his suitcase.

Dream immediately reddens, rolling his eyes.

\*\*\*\*\*

The mall is bustling at this time of year, and George immediately feels a little overwhelmed, unsure of where to start. He still needs to get gifts for his family, Puffy and Wilbur, the rest of his friends, *Dream* - oh god, he's got to find something for Dream, what the hell would Dream want...?

Luckily, Drista is ever confident, and leads them from shop to shop without hesitation.



Dream seems content to let her lead the way, strolling along leisurely a couple feet behind her, glancing at window displays in passing. He has a long, curling shopping list in hand that he refers to occasionally, asking Drista where the best place is to find CD's, perfume, and candy.

"I should have thought of making a list," George mutters, glancing over at Dream as he's scanning over the next few items. Dream looks up at him with a smile, then goes back to looking at the paper.

"Yeah, there's no way I would remember anything without writing it down. I have lists for everything. Homework assignments, people I need to call, groceries I need to buy... you name it."

George nods, letting his gaze wander around at the abundance of hanging lights and giant wreaths that decorate the space. It seems a little off with no snow in sight- everyone in their usual Florida attire of shorts and flip-flops- but it still feels wonderfully festive nonetheless.

They trail into Bath and Body Works, and George browses candles for Karl while Dream asks Drista what type of perfume their mother likes again.

"Doesn't Karl already have like a million candles?" Dream questions as George takes his items to the check-out.

"Yeah, but he asks for more every year," George sighs. "I ask every Christmas if he wants to mix it up but it's always candles, nail polish, and sweaters, as if he doesn't already have enough of those. I'm not one to deny a man his simple pleasures though, so more candles it is."

Dream laughs. "That's fair. I'm sure he'll love them."

\*\*\*\*\*

Drista has been staring intently at George across the food court table for a total of five minutes, slurping loudly at her milkshake. George doesn't quite know what to do with himself.

Dream left a minute or two ago to go get them hot pretzels, leaving George and Drista alone. Which would have been perfectly fine had either one of them started a casual conversation like, you know, *normal people*. But George has never been one to start conversations.

Instead he finds himself awkwardly pretending not to notice as Drista scrutinizes him, while he sips meekly at a plastic cup of water.

"So-" George starts, tugging on his shirt collar.

Drista slurps again and George winces.

She tilts her head to one side, pushing the shake forward and out of her way. "So..."

George gulps. "Um... how's scho-"

"You like my brother don't you?"

George nearly chokes mid-drink, pounding at his chest a few times and gasping for air. "Excuse me?" He coughs, feeling warmth flood his face.

Drista glances over to the pretzel shop with a bored expression, where Dream is still waiting in line. "You heard me." Seeing George's stunned expression, she continues sarcastically. "Oh, my bad... you don't like him then. That's fine. I wouldn't blame you. He is kind of an asshole. I mean he's

cocky, stubborn, forgetful-”

“No that’s not it,” George blinks a few times, trying to clear his head. “You just caught me off guard.”

Drista leans forward to rest her chin on her folded arms, smirking up at George. “I see. Then you like him.”

George sputters a bit, trying not to dig himself into a deeper hole. “He’s... fine,” he tries, cringing internally at how that sounds out loud.

“Ouch... harsh,” Drista replies with a low whistle. “*Fine.*”

George rubs a hand across his face. “No- that came out wrong.”

Drista shrugs innocently. “I’m not judging you George, I think my brother is unbearable too.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to say.”

“Really, I promise I won’t tell him that you think he’s annoying as hell.”

“I don’t-”

“If anything, I apologize for assuming anything different-”

George sighs loudly, placing his hand flat against the table with a loud thud. “Okay, yes I like him. I said it. Are you happy?”

Drista smiles brightly. “I knew it.”

George groans. “Am I really that obvious?”

“If it helps, he seems head over heels for you, too,” Drista supplies, looking at Dream, who catches them staring and waves. George quickly puts his head down on the small table in embarrassment. Drista snickers.

“Do you know if he even... ya know...?” George questions, voice muffled from behind his arms.

“Likes guys?” Drista finishes, and George nods awkwardly. “No clue,” she says, lifting her shoulders. “He’s never brought a boy home before, I can tell you that much. Aside from Sapnap once or twice, but that doesn’t really count.”

“So... that’s a no,” George replies. “Whoop dee doo.”

Drista lets out an exasperated huff. “No, that just means that you’ve impressed him a lot. He hasn’t brought that many girls around either.”

George peeks his head out from his arms just a little bit. “Really?”

She nods. “Really. You must be pretty special if he dragged you here for the whole break.”

George feels the blush creep all the way down his neck. “Oh,” he mumbles lamely.

“Yeah, oh,” Drista replies with a laugh. “So, are you gonna get him a present? I can give you some ideas if you want. He can be a little hard to shop for, but honestly, he’d probably get excited over a rock if it was coming from you.”

"I don't think I want to get him a rock."

"Okay. We'll try something else then."

George leans back in his chair, scanning the different shops around them. "I did want to get him something though, yeah. I just have no idea where to start."

Drista follows his gaze. "I'm sure you'll find something. I'll help."

George's eyes catch on Dream heading toward them, pretzels in hand. "I'd appreciate it," he says gratefully, then as a last second thought adds, "And will you like- not mention any of this to him? The gift or the..."

"Or the 'you having a big fat crush on him,' thing? Right, got it," Drista replies calmly.

"Drista-!"

"Okay, okay, I get it!" She says, throwing her hands in the air. "I will not breathe a single word of this to anyone."

George narrows his eyes. "Pinky promise?" He adds, holding out his pinky finger.

Drista looks at it with an unimpressed expression. "Pinky promises? Aren't you like, twenty-three?"

"Twenty-four."

She giggles, linking her pinky with George's. "Sure. Pinky promise."

"What are you two up to?" Dream asks, pulling out a seat and handing individually wrapped bags.

"Just talking about ditching you and making you walk home," Drista responds, grabbing for her steaming pretzel.

George nods in agreement as Dream rolls his eyes.

"Good to know you're bonding over your shared hatred of me," Dream says sarcastically, the hint of a smile playing on his face.

"I'm just glad I've found someone else that thinks you're just as obnoxious as I do," George teases, careful not to meet Dream's eyes.

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The search for the perfect present for Dream unfortunately leaves them empty handed. George browses sports stores, looking at sweatshirts for Dream's favorite football team, and shoe stores, with Drista commentating over his shoulder about Dream's lack of nice shoes. George picks up a bag of Warheads from the candy store as a last ditch idea after asking about Dream's favorite treats, but it's not quite enough. Everything is too mundane, or obvious, or tacky. He wants to get something personal. Something thoughtful.

Drista pats him on the back as they head out to the mall parking lot, loaded down with shopping bags.

"I'm sure you'll figure out something," she says, and George thanks her for the sentiment, though he still feels a pit of dissatisfaction in the pit of his stomach.

He absentmindedly wonders if Dream got him a gift. Which leads to thoughts of how awkward it would be if he got Dream a gift and Dream didn't, or maybe Dream's gift would be more expensive, or less expensive than his, or maybe he wouldn't like whatever George manages to come up with, or-

"Drista, did you ask Mom if she wanted us to pick up anything on the way home?" Dream asks, interrupting George's spiralling train of thought.

He's grateful for the distraction. Worrying will get him nowhere.

"Nope, she picked up the veggies she still needed while we were out," Drista replies, tossing her bags into the trunk of the minivan.

"Mom makes the best tacos," Dream pitches in, looking over at George with a gleam in his eye. "You're going to love them."

"I'm excited," George replies, grinning and buckling himself into the passenger seat.

*"It will be fine," he tells himself, trying to calm his racing mind. "I'll worry about the gift tomorrow. Just relax and enjoy yourself a little bit."*

He finds that with an easy smile from Dream, and a whole lot of carpool karaoke, he can ease his worries, and breathe a little easier.

And, just as promised, Julie's tacos end up being the best George has ever had.

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George isn't sure why he thought ice skating would be a good idea.

To be fair, it wasn't his idea- it was Dream's, but George had kind of assumed that the rest of the family would be tagging along on their little trip. But Drista and Julie were busy making home-made gingerbread and told them to go ahead.

Going ice skating alone with Dream was not a good idea for at least two reasons. One: George is pretty sure it's been ten years since the last time he's tried ice skating, and two: It feels awfully a lot like a date.

Which in and of itself is a problem because he and Dream *are not* dating, and it's far easier to accept said fact that they *are not*, and *will never be* together when Dream doesn't take him on these little fake dates. Doesn't offer to pay for his skates. Doesn't wrap his own scarf around George at the last second, because he knows George gets cold easily.

Because in the end, George is perfectly okay with being just friends with Dream. At least, he thinks he is. He's come to terms with the idea of having just that little bit of him, nothing more. George treasures their friendship more than anything, and no matter what thoughts keep him tossing and turning at night, he will hold onto that friendship like a lifeline.

Some part of him (that is starting to sound vaguely like Drista) says that he only wants that lifeline because he's afraid of letting go of that safety net, but George ignores it.

It's simply a little harder to ignore it when Dream's cheeks are flushed pink from the cold of the indoor ice arena, wobbling on lanky legs like a newborn foal. But George has gotten awfully good at swallowing the way his heart surges at the tiniest things Dream does, chanting a mantra of *friend, friend, friend*, in his mind.

“I thought you haven’t skated in years,” Dream huffs, gripping the edge of the barriers for support as he edges forward on the ice. George glides along slowly beside him.

“I haven’t,” he replies, trying not to laugh as Dream nearly biffs it for the fourth time. “I guess the muscle memory is just still there.”

“I’m an athlete, I’m supposed to be good at this stuff,” Dream grumbles.

George smirks and starts skating backwards, keeping his eyes on him. “Guess you’re just not as much of an exceptionally well trained athlete as I am,” he replies cheekily, as Dream lets out an “*Oh come on!*” at the sight.

George is surprised they even have a location for ice skating here in Florida, but apparently it was opened for the winter months, meaning (according to Dream) they just *had* to take advantage of the opportunity and go.

“Come away from the wall, Dream, it’s not so bad,” George says, watching Dream struggle forward.

“It is definitely very bad,” He replies anxiously, throwing one arm out to steady himself. “I’d rather not fall on my ass again, thank you very much.”

George chuckles and starts pulling ahead, just slightly. “I guess I’ll have to leave you then…” he hums. “If you can’t keep up.”

“Now that’s just mean,” Dream whines, trying to match George’s pace while still hugging the wall.

“What was that? I can’t hear you from all the way up here,” George replies, cupping one hand over his ear in an exaggerated motion.

Dream curses under his breath. “Okay, fine, fine. But you’ll have to help me,” he says, pushing off the side gently, both arms flailing slightly. His face is screwed up in concentration.

George waits patiently, with an amused smile. Finally, after a few near falls, Dream drifts within an arm’s reach, and he grips onto George’s outstretched forearms.

“Now was that so hard,” George chides, and Dream tries to swat at him, ultimately failing when he nearly loses balance.

“Yeah, yeah, quit gloating and show me what I’m doing wrong.”

They take it slowly, staying out of the middle and focusing on individual movements for the next half hour. George edges Dream’s skates out of their parallel formation, so his toes turn outward like George’s do- which improves the situation fairly decently. He carefully skates backwards while Dream skates forwards, never letting go of George’s arms or hands as he gets used to the motion of gliding forward. He improves drastically under George’s amateur tutelage, and soon enough they’re able to skate side by side- though Dream keeps one guiding hand on George’s shoulder at all times.

“You know, I think I’m a natural,” Dream says, as they loop around past the entrance gate again. “I could do this all day.”

In response, George makes a point of stepping away from his arm, leaving Dream to stumble forward. Once he’s righted himself again, George raises his eyebrows innocently. “You were

saying?"

"Okay fine. I guess you maybe helped a little bit."

They both chuckle lightly, falling back into a silent pattern of *left, right, left, right*.

After a while George hums to himself, a soft smile on his face.

Dream glances over. "What?"

"It's nothing," George replies, shaking his head slightly.

Dream nudges him. "C'mon."

George pauses, chewing at his lip. "I don't know, I was just thinking that this is a lot better than I thought it would be."

"Well I'm glad going ice skating together has been not-terrible." He laughs. "But what exactly did you think would be so bad about it. Am I really that annoying?"

"You make me nervous," George blurts out, and immediately feels embarrassment flood his face.

Dream slows his skating for a second. "I do?"

"No. Yes. Just- please forget I said anything," George says, trying to focus on the ice ahead of them, heart pounding.

Dream smiles shyly, looking rather pleased with himself. "I make *the* George Vincent nervous. How about that," he murmurs.

"Only because you're so bad at skating. It's ruining my pro-skater image just being seen with you," George counters quickly, trying to cover his moment of honesty. He knows it's not working from the way Dream's smile only grows.

He scoffs and ducks out from under Dream's arm, skating ahead several feet. Dream catches up with little effort, quietly matching George's pace for a minute or so.

George is about to tell him to screw off, and forget this ever happened when Dream speaks up.

"Can I hold your hand?" He asks casually.

George thinks he might keel over.

"Yeah," he says instead, in a somewhat strangled voice.

With little dramatics, Dream reaches out with those ridiculously long arms of his and laces their fingers together.

It's heavenly.

Of course, George would rather die than admit that. He stays deathly silent, trying desperately to hide the fact that he is falling apart at the seams.

Dream's hand is warm against his, despite the cold environment- long fingers brushing against his as they skim the glassy surface below them.

“Nervous?” Dream asks after a while, with a hint of amusement.

“Never,” George replies, keeping his gaze fixed firmly ahead. His heart pounds loudly in his chest. Surely Dream can hear it. Surely everyone can hear it.

“Good. Me neither,” Dream says easily, though the hesitation in his tone lets George know he’s lying.

“Cool.”

“Cool.”

They continue their wide arc of the ice rink, drifting close enough to bump shoulders.

When Dream asks to hold his hand again on the drive home, George replies with a calm and collected, “Yes.”

And if he sounds at all nervous, then that’s probably just Dream’s egotistical brain playing tricks on him.

Obviously.

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George isn’t sure if something changes in the next several days, or if Dream has always laughed extra loud at his jokes, tossed around easy compliments, and found little excuses to touch him throughout the day- a hand on the small of his back when he passes in the kitchen, ruffling through his hair after a shower, fingers lingering just a second too long when he passes the salt.

Needless to say, George isn’t complaining.

He pretends not to notice the gestures, offering only small smiles and quiet chuckles.

Then... he proceeds to lie awake at night, mulling them over in detail.

He memorizes the feeling of Dream’s fingertips, mapping out the surface of his palms in his memory so he’ll never forget the divot of each crease . He replays the way Dream’s voice softens when he talks to him like a broken record, dripping with honey and sunshine and a sort of warmth that he can’t quite put into words. Paints a picture of what warm green eyes might look like when you can’t quite see green. Wonders... wonders, with tingles of fear, and embarrassment, and excitement, what it would be like to have all of that. To have Dream be really and truly *his* .

In the deepest, velvety blackness of night, George closes his eyes and imagines soft kisses, and lazy mornings, and cold hands always wrapped up in warm ones.

Those are his secret thoughts. Thoughts that if ever spoken aloud would surely make his skin split open, revealing all the honey, and gold he has been trying so hard to hide. Revealing a heart that’s growing too large for his ribs, threatening to burst.

George doesn’t sleep.

And tells himself a million and one reasons why he can’t have Dream.

Then... he starts convincing himself out of every one.

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George has gotten used to living alone. Well, alone aside from a few roommates, who mostly keep to themselves.

The Bennett home is nothing like his quiet apartment. It's strange to have people around him constantly, pulling him in for assorted Christmas activities, and asking what he wants for dinner. Hell, he's not even used to regular meals, but Dream's family eats all three together, breakfast, lunch and dinner. They take him in as one of their own, though it's only been a week, and George absentmindedly thinks that *this* is what home should feel like. It's loud, and a little overwhelming, and absolutely wonderful.

They share Christmas traditions, with George teaching the Bennett's how to make his mother's pudding, and them teaching him how to play an utterly ridiculous game eloquently named, "Find the Pickle," which consists of hiding a pickle ornament within the branches of the Christmas tree.

Dream finds it every time, and Drista complains that it's just because he's the tallest and can see the whole tree better.

They induct George into the sacred ritual of "Girls Night," which is a strange title for an event that has always been just Dream and Drista, only one of the two being a girl. George doesn't question it though, and follows the instructions to go get into his pajamas and grab as many pillows and blankets as he can carry.

"What should I do with these?" He asks Drista hesitantly, entering the living room with a stack piled high with the requested items.

"Just throw them everywhere," she instructs, gesturing to where a space has been cleared out in front of the couch. Already, there are two blankets stretched out on the floor, overlapping in places.

George follows her directions- tossing the pile into a heap, then working on spreading them into any empty corners of the carpet.

Dream comes in with his own armful and begins mimicking their actions.

"Why exactly do we do this?" He whispers to Dream in passing, who just shrugs in reply.

"We used to make full-on forts, but that got tiring after a while. So now it's just the blankets and pillows. Makes things festive, I suppose."

George nods, adjusting a stray pillow. "It's fun. I like it," he replies.

It's a little strange, having a fourteen year old girl he met one week ago helping him apply a charcoal mask, and paint his nails. The mask is cool and slimy against his skin, and he flinches away from it at first, but Drista tuts at him and moves his head back into place.

"If Dream could hold still for thirty seconds while I did his, then so can you, George," she insists, smearing more of the black goop across his cheek.

"What colors do you want?" Drista asks once the mask has dried to George's face.

"I don't know, whatever works," he replies, careful not to move his mouth too much and crack the face mask.

Dream has already gone to work on his nails, alternating between purple and black.



“Why don’t you just let me do it,” Drista whines, sending a dissatisfied look in Dream’s direction. “You suck at painting nails.”

“You’re busy.” He hums distractedly. “And besides, I’m getting better.” He holds out one hand, displaying the finished nails.

“They’d look better if you didn’t bite them,” she replies with a raised eyebrow, and Dream scowls, pulling the hand back.

“I’m working on it, okay? I don’t even realize I’m doing it half the time.”

Drista sighs, tapping George’s wrist so he gives her his other hand. “Now George, on the other hand, has very nice nails. Don’t you, George.”

“I have no concept of good nails, honestly,” he admits. “My sister thought we were too annoying to ever ask to paint nails. She just did it with her friends.”

“I mean, don’t get me wrong, I still think Dream is fucking annoying, but as each other’s only sibling, we have a blood oath to force each other into whatever interest we’re currently a part of.”

Dream rolls his eyes at the “blood oath,” but doesn’t deny it. “I’ll bet you wish I was a sister,” he says.

“Are you kidding? We’re already needy attention whores as is, imagine if we had to compete with each other for clothes too?” Drista makes a noise of disgust. “No thank you. I’d rather deal with your football games and endless episodes of Power Rangers.”

“I don’t even watch Power Rangers anymore,” Dream snorts.

“Yeah you don’t need to- you watched the damn show so many times you probably have it memorized,” she replies.

“Probably. Fuck off.”

Drista snickers, leaning in close to coat George’s pinky finger in a thin coat of light blue polish.

“I was going to do green and red for Christmas, but I guess that would look kind of boring to you, wouldn’t it?” She says absentmindedly, and George perks up.

“How did you know I was colorblind?” He asks curiously.

Drista laughs. “Take a guess, genius,” she says, nodding towards Dream. “Talks about you all the time, remember?”

“*Drista*,” Dream says between gritted teeth, blushing all the way to his roots. “Can it.”

George can’t help the smile that tugs at the corners of his mouth. He says nothing.

“The things I know about you, my friend,” Drista says in a low voice to George, wiggling her eyebrows. “This guy has forced so many George stories down my throat, you would not *believe* -”

“Drista it’s a good thing my nails aren’t dry, or you would be dead right now,” Dream says icily, shooting her a glare while she and George chuckle.

“Sounds like some simp behavior, Dream,” George adds.

“Oh shut up,” Dream replies in exasperation.

Drista finishes George’s nails and starts on her own, instructing Dream to go set up the movie.

Patches meanders in with a curious meow, kneading at one of the pillows before perching atop it.

They wait for the nail polish to dry, then all take turns peeling off the face masks. It’s a strange sensation, and leaves his skin feeling raw, stinging slightly. Drista assures him that the feeling is normal, and that he’s not having some strange allergic reaction.

Julie peeks in as Dream is scanning through Netflix.

“Want me to grab you guys some popcorn before I head to bed?” She asks, leaning against the back of the couch.

“Sure you don’t want to join us, Mom?” Drista says, putting the nail polish away.

“Maybe if you weren’t starting a movie at-” Julie check the time on her phone, “At 1:43 a.m.”

“Just admit you’re old,” Dream chides, and she smacks the back of his head.

“Do you want popcorn or not?”

Dream laughs. “Sorry. Popcorn would be great, thanks Mom.”

“That’s more like it,” she says. “Call me old again and I’ll burn it on purpose.”

“Understood,” Dream responds, settling onto the floor by George in front of Drista, against the couch. He leans his head back into her lap, and she immediately starts threading her fingers through his hair.

George watches, enraptured, as she combs through the long strands, and starts to braid sections of it absentmindedly. Dream closes his eyes and leans into the touch. It takes every ounce of self restraint George has to not lean closer and ask Drista for a turn.

That would definitely be weird. Right? Right.

But his hair looks infinitely soft. George wants to know how it would feel between his fingers.

“Do you know how to braid George?” Drista asks, making him jump.

“I-uh, no,” he responds, feeling himself clam up. “I mean, I get the idea, but I’ve never done it.”

“Come try,” she says unassumingly, scooching over on the couch.

Dream gives him a sideways glance. George looks away. “Um- are you sure?”

“Mhm,” Drista replies, patting the place on the couch and waiting for George to clamber up, legs swung on either side of Dream’s wide shoulders.

“Wouldn’t it be easier on your hair, Drista?” He asks shakily.

“Nope. I’m teaching you. It’s gotta be Dream,” she says, with the hint of a teasing lilt in her voice.

Shit. Drista had definitely noticed him staring.

George hovers his hands over the tousled dark blonde curls, still afraid to touch.

“It’s okay George,” Dream adds, as if sensing his nervousness. “I don’t bite.”

After another moment of hesitation, Drista gently guides George’s hands into Dream’s hair.

It *is* soft.

George begins to comb through it gently with his fingers, stomach jumping when he sees the edge of a smile curl on Dream’s face below him. The braids Drista had created have loosened now, but still hold their position, tucked underneath golden curls. George takes his time untangling each strand, watching the small ways Dream reacts to the touch, tilting his head back slightly against his palm, or letting out a contented hum. George is sure he’s bright red right now, but doesn’t care, starting to section off tiny pieces in the same way Drista had. She directs him with a patient tone on how to fold one piece of hair over the other, threading them together one by one. Little by little, small braids are woven randomly into Dream’s hair, who stays surprisingly quiet and still throughout the process.

At one point, Julie comes in with a heaping bowl of popcorn, eyes softening at the sight of the three of them grouped together on the couch.

George is initially embarrassed, his first instinct being to jump away, but Julie doesn’t seem particularly shocked or bothered by this strange boy braiding her son’s hair. She merely sets the popcorn bowl on Drista’s lap, kissing her, and then Dream on the forehead and wishing them all a goodnight.

“No goodnight kiss for George?” Drista teases as Julie pulls away.

She chuckles at that. “He is always welcome to one, but I won’t weird him out with our overly affectionate habits,” Julie says, patting George’s head as she passes. He smiles at the action and Drista giggles.

“Don’t stay up too late, alright kids? I don’t want you dead to the world for the rest of the decorating tomorrow. We’ve got lots to do.”

“No promises,” Dream replies, leaning back against George’s legs, neck craning to look at his mother.

“You especially, Mr. ‘Sleeps Till Noon on the Daily,’” Julie says with a pointed finger. “If you’re in a bad mood tomorrow it’s your own fault.”

Dream shrugs, with a grin. “What can I say, it’s my special, rare talent.”

“A pretty lame one at that,” Drista adds.

“You’re a doofus,” Julie replies with a fond eye roll. “Goodnight everyone.”

They all chorus back goodnights, and start up a random movie. It’s an old Disney rom-com that George remembers vaguely from his childhood. Patches curls up in Dream’s lap, and George lifts himself back onto the floor to stroke her soft brown fur.

Drista stretches out on the couch, burrowing under a blanket and reaching for another handful of popcorn.

“She likes you,” Dream says softly, as George scratches at the space between Patches ears.

“She’s just too tired to stop me,” George insists, but feels delight spread through him regardless, at

the loud purring rumbling under his palms. He shivers slightly, inching closer so he's pressed up against Dream's side. "My cat was never this quiet," he says, stifling a yawn. "She would just meow for attention constantly. And she snored. I didn't even know cats could snore."

Dream chuckles, rubbing his thumb absentmindedly against Patches' paw. "Tell me more."

"About my cat?"

"About anything." Dream sighs contentedly. "I just like listening to you talk."

George's stomach flip flops a few times, and he blinks to clear his head, giddiness mixing with exhaustion from the day. "Okay. Okay, yeah I'll talk," he responds with a quiet smile. "She was a gray tabby. We named her Luca."

The movie fades into background noise as George rambles on in a low voice, barely fighting the urge to sleep. Dream has his eyes closed, the corners of his mouth turned upward the entire time. He nods, and chuckles occasionally.

It's almost natural the way they curl closer together as the minutes drag on, the warmth of each other's presence making them drowsy. George isn't quite sure how he got to laying on Dream's chest, but it's comfortable, and he's too tired to move away. Dream has shifted so one arm wraps protectively around him, rubbing slow circles into his arm. George realizes he hasn't been talking for a while, and wonders when he stopped, hoping he didn't fall asleep mid-sentence. The TV only displays the frozen credits now, the screen casting a soft glow over the room.

George knows this is the exact type of thing he *should not* be doing to stay in safe territory. Friendly territory. Territory that won't get his heart miserably broken and destroy months worth of tentative bonding.

But in the end, he's only human. In the end, he lets himself give in, just this once.

He falls asleep to the even sound of Dream's steady heartbeat, and thinks this is how it should always be.

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Five days before Christmas, George asks Dream to drive him back to his apartment to grab (supposedly) a few more changes of clothes. Dream makes a move to get out of the car and George stops him quickly, palms facing him.

"No, you can just stay here, I'll be quick," he assures, and Dream sits back in the driver's seat.

"Are you sure? I can help you carry stuff if you need," he offers, and George declines again, trying to not look too suspicious.

"Mhm. I'm sure. It's just a few things I need to grab. Shouldn't be a problem."

Dream shrugs. "Alright. Just text me if you need anything."

George offers a quick thumbs up and heads into the apartment with a sigh of relief. Once inside, he goes straight for the kitchen cupboards, rifling through them until he finds the specific item he's looking for.

"There you are."

The unassuming book gets wrapped up in a grocery bag, and George feels a mix of excitement and nervousness flutter in his belly. Maybe it's a stupid gift. Maybe Dream won't like it.

Despite the worries burrowing into his mind, George smiles to himself. He can't help but feel it's just the right kind of thing to give to Dream. Earnest and thoughtful, but not too over the top.

He grabs an extra pair of sweatpants and a few T-shirts to cover his tracks and heads back out to the car.

"Found what you were looking for?" Dream asks, and George nods in satisfaction.

"Yes, I think so."

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The Bennett family talks. A lot. They talk while they're cleaning the kitchen, and talk while they're matching socks, and sometimes just sit in the living room together and do nothing else but talk.

It takes some getting used to. Despite having multiple siblings, and being the captain of a university cheerleading team, George doesn't usually do a lot of talking. He prefers to watch, and listen. Think his words out before speaking them aloud. Keep his thoughts and emotions bottled up close to his chest.

This simply will not do around Dream's family. George finds he doesn't mind all that much. They ask him about school, and the cheer team, and what his favorite desserts are. About if Dream keeps his apartment tidy, and how they met, (George makes sure to leave out the story of their real first meeting, claiming they were introduced through mutual friends.) The answers come easy, and George finds himself becoming more and more comfortable with this odd and delightful group.

Dream, as it turns out, sleeps enough to even rival George, so he spends several hours a day alone with Drista or Julie, helping them out with little tasks and playing games together. At first it's awkward not having Dream there as a buffer, but soon enough he and Drista are teasing each other just as much as they do with their actual siblings.

"I can't believe this colorblind asshole thinks he can beat me in Uno when he can't even see the cards," Drista mumbles, shuffling the deck.

"Watch your language missy," Julie scolds in passing, and Drista calls out a "*sorry, mom.*"

"I can still see the colors idiot," George replies with an eyeroll, propping himself up on his elbows on the living room floor.

"Oh yeah, what's this then?" She flashes a red card at him.

He can tell the colors apart easy enough if he squints. "That's red."

"You probably cheated somehow," Drista mumbles.

George gives her a cheeky shrug. "Or maybe you just don't know anything about being colorblind."

"I'm George and I think I'm so cool because I could correctly identify the color red one time," Drista says in a mocking tone, shuffling the card back into the deck and dealing them out.

“You literally asked-”

Drista rolls her eyes and speaks over the top of him loudly. “Just shut up and let me beat you in Uno already.”

“Good luck,” George scoffs.

“Don’t need it.”

“Idiot.”

“Idiot.”

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It’s 6:47 a.m. when George wakes to find Julie already in the kitchen, hands wrapped around a steaming mug. He hadn’t been able to sleep, and after multiple attempts to drift off he had given up, deciding to go get some breakfast.

“Morning,” George offers quietly as he enters the kitchen, and Julie looks up in surprise, before smiling warmly.

“Good morning, George. I didn’t expect you to be up this early,” she says, taking a sip of tea and directing him towards the cereal. “You even beat Drista.”

“I can’t seem to beat her at anything else, so I’ll take it,” George replies, and Julie chuckles.

“She’s definitely competitive. I was glad to hear you gave her a run for her money in Monopoly the other night.”

George grabs a bowl and a spoon, settling it on the counter a few seats away from Julie.

“Beginner’s luck I’m sure,” he smiles goodnaturedly, and she hums in amusement.

They settle into a comfortable silence, George shooting a quick text to Karl to ask how he’s doing in New York. Julie watches the outside world begin to busy itself through the back window with a faraway expression. She’ll glance over at George occasionally when it seems he isn’t paying attention.

“You know, I owe a lot to you.”

George looks up, slightly surprised. “To me?”

Julie nods, face earnest and focused.

George shifts in his seat, confused. “I hope I’m not being rude by asking, but what exactly have I done?”

She pauses, pondering over her words and tracing the rim of her mug absentmindedly. “Dream, he... he’s needed someone like you for a long time now.”

The statement knocks the wind out of George, as he tries to decipher the layers of complexity in Julie’s voice. Seeing his uncertainty, she closes her hands around the porcelain, continuing.

“My son, well, I think he’s been a little... lost? I guess that’s the best way to put it.” She purses her lips. “Ever since his dad passed he’s had a hard time finding the right outlets... the right support system.”

George has heard Dream mention his father before in offhand conversations, but never pried. He seemed to be okay with it now, but old wounds could be quick to reopen. It was just something they never touched on. He knew, but somehow it hits harder now.

“His dad... he...” George trails off, unsure of how to phrase the question. “I’m sorry, you don’t have to answer if it makes you uncomfortable.”

Julie shakes her head. “No, it’s okay. He had a brain tumor that they found a little too late. By that point it was just a matter of time. The doctors tried their best, but we lost him two years later. Dream was fourteen at the time.”

Fourteen. Only fourteen. George’s heart aches for him. He almost wishes Dream was there so he could hold him close to his chest, whisper apologies and condolences that are years too late, but might ease some sorrow all the same.

Julie takes an even breath. “He kind of shut down for a while after that. Calvin was everything to him. It was like he didn’t know how to be himself anymore. It hurt... to see him like that.” Julie’s hand trembles ever so slightly. “He was so quiet. I didn’t like him being that quiet.”

George is acutely aware that maybe he should feel uncomfortable right now, maybe this is too invasive- hearing about this fourteen year old Dream that’s a stranger to him now. But somehow, it just makes things fall into place. Makes him feel closer to this tightly bound family, that’s not really his, but welcomes him in all the same.

“There have been a lot of bad friends. A lot of bad outlets. A lot of bad people that have served as adequate distractions while he’s found his footing, but were never really there for him. Never really cared. I tried to discourage that sort of crowd but in the end it was his decision who he spends his time with. He’s all grown up now, after all.” Julie pushes one hand through her hair, distractedly, the hand coming to a rest on the side of her neck. Her expression is hard-tinged with sadness and bitterness. When she makes eye contact with George, it softens.

“And then you showed up, George.” She shakes her head slowly, as if in disbelief. “And I’m not quite sure how, but you brought him back.”

The greater part of George wonders, *“How? How could I have done all that? I haven’t done anything extraordinary.”* Another part of him feels his heart surge in relief and gladness that he was able to lighten his friend’s load, even a little bit.

“There were others too, Sapnap has been so very good to him... some of his coaches, and teammates, but he only lights up like this around you.” She looks at George in amazement and gratitude. “It’s like he’s not afraid to just be himself and be happy again.” She reaches out to squeeze his hand, and George lets her, meeting her gaze.

“And that is why I’m thankful to you, George,” she says.

George feels like the world has stopped at this kitchen countertop. “I’m not quite sure why it’s me, but I’m glad he’s happy,” he fumbles. “He deserves to be happy.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Julie says softly, then squeezes his hand again, eyebrows furrowed slightly. “And George, I hope you’re happy too.”

“I am.” he replies, and is glad to find that he really does mean it. In the childhood home of a boy he’s known for six months, with this woman holding the hand of a stranger like he’s something beautifully precious, he is happier than he’s been in a very long time.

## Chapter End Notes

My [Twitter](#)



## Chapter 8

### Chapter Summary

“Are you gonna open it?”

“Oh right,” George starts, and turns the gift over in his hands carefully.

It’s somewhat small, and rather dense. There’s no sound of sliding or scattering inside as he tilts it from side to side. The packaging is a shimmery white, with a blue ribbon.

“I hope you like it,” Dream mumbles, almost to himself, folding his hands carefully in his lap. George notices Dream’s knee is bouncing.

### Chapter Notes

Hello folks! Sorry it's been so long! I'm working full time now, and I cranked out another 22k word fic (check it out if you haven't!) so I've been pretty busy, but I am so glad to get back to this! I have loved seeing all of your comments and support. Sorry I haven't been able to respond to all of them, but just know that I do read them (multiple times), and they seriously make my day. You guys are awesome.

As always, thanks so much to my betas [Sky Logan](#) and [Ro](#)!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“C’mon, George! We don’t have all night,” Drista drawls in the doorway as George rifles through his bag. “What are you even grabbing anyway?”

“A jacket,” George replies with a shrug. “In case I get cold.”

She lets out a huff. “We’re going to be on the beach! You don’t need a jacket!”

“It’s Christmas Eve, Drista,” he sighs, finally snatching up the dark blue windbreaker from where it was buried in his suitcase. “In *December* mind you. There’s something distinctly wrong about wearing shorts and short sleeves for a Christmas outing.”

“Listen, just because-”

“He’s kind of got a point Dris,” Dream chimes in, appearing in the doorway at his sister’s side. “Plus it’ll probably be breezy by the ocean. You’re going to be shaking like a leaf once the sun goes down, just watch.”

Drista groans. “You *would* take his side.”

Dream meets George’s eyes across the room with an amused smile. “What can I say, George just happens to be incredibly smart and perceptive.”

George snorts and Drista makes a gagging noise.

“Ew. You guys are the worst,” she says, pushing away from the doorframe. “I’m going to go get Mom to start the car. If I’m lucky maybe she’ll leave you two behind.”

“Good luck- Mom probably likes George more than both of us,” Dream replies with a shrug.

Drista shakes her head. “I hate that you’re right.”

“What can I say? It feels good being the favorite Bennett child,” George adds nonchalantly. Dream perks up in pleasant surprise at the comment, his ears turning noticeably pink and his smile growing impossibly wider.

Internally George wants to back off of the statement, slightly embarrassed by his boldness and the implications laced in his words, but Dream’s flustered reaction makes it worth standing his ground. Instead, George raises a teasing eyebrow as he passes by.

“You coming?”

Dream nods meekly, the grin still plastered across his face. “Lead the way.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Every year, the Bennett family has a Christmas Eve picnic on the beach. The tradition has been adhered to since Dream and Drista were little, and George thinks it is an utter shame he is only just now experiencing it.

It’s nothing like the Christmas Eves of George’s past. There’s no snow, and no cheek-pinching relatives that he swears he’s never met before. Instead of a beautifully roasted turkey garnished with cranberry sauce and stuffing, they eat individually wrapped ham sandwiches and drink from cans of cranberry Sprite. There’s no toddlers clinging to his legs, but Drista fills the role well enough- covering everyone’s feet in sand whenever she gets bored. Julie nags at her to at least finish her food before she starts bothering people. Drista rolls her eyes, giving one last pat to the mound submerging George’s bare feet before taking a bite of her (now slightly sandy) sandwich.

The sun is starting to get low in the sky, and more and more of the usual visitors have packed up, leaving their little group mostly alone. Florida beaches are admittedly better than the ones back home, and George longs for warm spring and summer days here. He can imagine them all dunking each other in the water and laughing as Dream shrieks at the slightest sign of fish (there’s a story behind that little phobia that Dream has yet to tell him). They could have sandcastle building contests, and look for tide pools. Drista would surely get pinched by an unruly crab after diving in headfirst to look for shells.

Still though, the weather is beautiful, and George relishes the ocean breeze threading through his hair, and the soft sand between his toes. It’s all simpler, but feels just as eventful as other Christmases.

As soon as dinner is finished and put away, Julie pulls out a worn white volleyball, herding everyone to the tarnished and ragged net strung across part of the sand. There’s a few large holes in the middle, and the poles have long since peeled and rusted under the elements, but it still makes for a functional sand court.

“I think I’ll just watch,” George tries to protest, before Drista tuts at him and pushes him to the opposite side of the net where Dream stands waiting.

“Then we’d have uneven teams,” she says matter of factly. “Plus Dream sucks at volleyball; he needs all the help he can get.”

Dream scoffs. “I’m not that bad.”

“Let’s see you return a single one of my serves then,” Drista shoots back with a smug grin, passing an amused Julie as she makes her way to the back line. Once she’s out of hearing range, Dream shoots a sideways glance towards George and whispers loudly to him.

“That was a complete lie by the way. I am really bad.” He looks towards Drista with a wary look, watching as she tosses the ball in the air a few times in preparation. “I apologize in advance.”

George snickers. “You can’t possibly be worse than I am. I don’t think I’ve played volleyball since I was like six, back when my older sister was obsessed with it. She used to rope me into practicing with her, and I couldn’t get a single hit.”

Across the court, Julie cups one hand over her mouth, making a comment to Drista, who smiles and replies with something that they can’t pick up on from this distance. Julie laughs and gives her a thumbs up. Dream watches, before he shakes his head goodnaturedly and continues.

“Dris plays on a club team, and my mom played in high school. I don’t know why they always gang up against me, but at least you’re here this go around.” He flashes George a grateful smile that makes his stomach flutter a little.

“So glad I can get my ass kicked with you by my side,” George returns, leaning to punching Dream’s shoulder lightly before finding his spot in the sand.

“Hey losers, quit flirting so I can serve already,” Drista calls out loudly, earning a scandalized “*Drista!*” from her mother, who shoots them both an apologetic look.

George blushes but Dream seems unbothered, shouting back, “Hey loser, hurry up and miss your serve so I can keep flirting!”

George’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise, and he claps a hand over his mouth to suppress a shocked giggle. “Bold today are we?”

Dream centers his gaze again, tilting his head just slightly. “You like it.”

“Focus on the ball, idiot.”

Only a second later, the volleyball is soaring over the sad looking net, Drista letting out a triumphant whoop as it hits the sand right at a very distracted Dream’s feet.

George sighs, kicking sand at Dream’s ankles coyly in passing as he picks up the ball, throwing back to the other side.

Dream sputters a bit, but George merely shrugs.

“I tried to warn you,” he hums with a self satisfied smile.

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They keep up the volleyball game until the sun starts to dip low in the sky, painting the ocean gold and the sky pink.

Despite the shenanigans at the beginning, George and Dream manage to hold their own decently

enough against the other Bennetts. Julie and Drista still have a clear upper hand, leaving George scrambling for the hard-to-reach back corners on each serve, but he and Dream soon find a rhythm, working in tandem to return the ball and send it back over at least half of the time.

Despite his inexperience, they find that George is still a little more inclined to volleyball than Dream is- being nimble and quick- but Dream still has a rather annoying eight inches or so on him, meaning he can actually get an arm above the net. He wastes no opportunity in flaunting said height difference, holding the ball above George's head when it's time for him to serve, and brushing his fingertips along the top of the net whenever they have a break- eyes trained challengingly on his teammate.

George pretends to be bothered, simply rolling his eyes at the displays, and waiting for Dream to inevitably give in and drop the ball into his hands. Really though, he likes the idea of being tucked within Dream's long arms under soft covers, or even caged between them with his back pressed to the wall, Dream's lips hot on his.

He shakes off those thoughts as quickly as he is able, and if Dream notices the blush high on George's cheeks while he towers over him with a smug smile, he doesn't say so.

Once they're through calling for pointless rematches, Julie places the volleyball back in her large beach bag, instead reaching for a handful of thin metal sticks.

"What are those?" George questions, wrapping his hands in the sleeves of his windbreaker as a particularly cold breeze whispers across his neck and sends a chill down his spine.

"Sparklers," Dream replies. "It's our little version of a fireworks show."

George nods curiously, watching as Julie hands one to Drista, who waits patiently at her side with an open palm.

"Have you used one before?"

George glances back at Dream. "No. Only seen them in pictures."

"C'mon, boys," Julie calls, digging around her bag for a lighter. "There's plenty to go around."

"I'll show you," Dream assures, sensing George's apprehension. "They're pretty fun."

They light Drista's sparkler first. It catches in an instant, and her eyes light up with delight as the sparks start traveling down, appearing and disappearing in bright fragments. It's mesmerizing to watch.

Dream grabs his stick, then passes an identical one to George.

"We can just light it on Drista's- like this." With that, he connects the dark tipped end of his sparkler to Drista's. Within seconds, it is giving off a similar yellow-white light. Julie lights hers in the same fashion.

"Ready?" Dream asks, holding out his sparkler towards George.

"How do you know it won't land on your hands and burn you?" He questions nervously.

"It's not like normal fire- even if the sparks touch your skin, they don't really hurt. Less thermal energy or something," Dream explains, then softens slightly. "It'll be okay, I promise."

“Fine. If you’re sure,” George says after a moment, connecting his metal stick to Dream’s and wincing when it starts spitting out sparks from the end. Once he’s sure his fingers aren’t about to catch on fire, he lets out the breath he didn’t realize he was holding, and lifts the sparkler up and away from his body. “Like that?”

Dream smiles. “Mhm. Perfect.”

The setting sun gives a special kind of glow to Dream’s skin. It looks soft- more so than normal- and warm, and it takes all of George’s willpower to not reach out and touch it. Kiss it.

George tears his gaze away from where Dream is delightedly trailing the sparkler through the air, leaving a line of light in its wake and using it to make assorted patterns.

He shuffles over to Drista- who is currently trying to keep a hold of her sparkler whilst hugging herself tightly to combat the chill settling in with the evening.

“You look cold,” he remarks innocently, eyeing the goosebumps covering her arms.

Drista keeps her gaze steadily ahead. “Am not.”

“Are too.”

“You’re delusional.”

“Hm... still feel like making fun of me for bringing a jacket?” George smirks.

“You’re impossible,” she mutters, not giving an inch.

George chuckles and rolls his eyes a little before extending his sparkler towards her.

“Quit being difficult and hold this.”

Drista wrinkles her nose. “Hold your own sparkler,” she scoffs, raising one eyebrow.

Julie gives them a curious look from where she is standing several feet away, chatting with Dream and waving her sparkler around absentmindedly.

“Just do it,” George insists, practically shoving the metal rod into Drista’s hands. She yelps in surprise, barely avoiding the hot end and securing her hold on it.

“Watch it! I could have burned myse-” Drista starts, but trails off as George starts to pull the sleek blue windbreaker over his head. “What are you doing?”

George pauses. “What does it look like I’m doing?”

Realizing, Drista takes one step back. “Oh come on, you’ve got to be kidding.”

George finally tugs the piece of fabric free. “I’m not doing it cause I feel bad for you or anything,” he assures with feigned seriousness, taking both sparklers promptly out of her hands. “I just felt a sudden fever come over me and immediately needed to get rid of this jacket...”

“George-”

He places the wadded up windbreaker in her arms before she can continue. “It would really be a favor to me if you wore it. That way I won’t accidentally leave it in the sand where it might get stolen or mauled by a ferocious sea creature.”

Drista gives George an incredulous look. “You are so *weird*,” she says emphatically.

George lets out a defeated sigh. “Just put on the jacket.”

Drista does. She wears the jacket the rest of the night, until they’ve burned through all the sparklers, and the stars are starting to come out. They can barely see each other like this, their faces lit only by phone flashlights and white-yellow sparks, popping and hissing.

George watches the sparks burn their way down to the bottom of the metal stick, mesmerized. Further down the beach, he can hear the sound of laughter, feet kicking through the freezing surf, but he is frozen in time- watching the line of light disappear into nothing.

Dream chases after Drista, weaving his sparkler up and down as he goes, creating lazy waves behind him.

Julie warns them not to accidentally impale each other, but her voice is muffled by the sounds of thrilled screams and hearty wheezes.

Absentmindedly, George wonders if this is all a little too good to be true. This family, with the endless space in their hearts- willing to take in a complete stranger as one of their own without hesitation. This night, with the bright moon and a full stomach, and soft sand beneath his feet. He wonders if this will also fizzle out in a few months' time, until tonight is nothing but a bittersweet memory. Beautiful things always tend to be like that. They burn so brightly that you can't help but be entranced for one breathtaking moment. And then they end, and you're not quite sure if you're better off forgetting or holding on to what you've lost.

The picnic blanket around his shoulders- placed there delicately by Dream shortly after George gave up his jacket- suddenly feels heavy. George watches, and makes secret wishes on every star he can see.

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Christmas morning starts with a bang.

Literally.

Drista barges into the room with little warning, nearly knocking the door off its hinges as it bursts open.

“It’s Christmas motherfuckers!” She exclaims, making Dream’s sleepy eyes go wide.

“What are you on?? Mom’s gonna hear you!” He hisses back, looking down the hallway warily.

Drista practically skips over to the blinds, opening them with little warning. George and Dream both groan and wince away from the sun streaming in. “I don’t care. Let her hear. I’m too high on Christmas spirit to care.”

“Can’t the Christmas spirit wait a few more hours?” George asks, snuggling further under his blankets. “We hardly got any sleep last night thanks to that stupid Monopoly game.”

“Which I won by the way,” Dream pipes in, earning a glare from George.

“Nope,” Drista replies, making a popping sound on the ‘p’. “I just woke Mom up and she needs help with breakfast. We’re having french toast.”

The mention of breakfast makes George perk up a little, feeling his stomach grumble slightly. “French toast?” He remarks interestedly, and Drista nods. “Okay, fine I’ll get up.”

Dream is harder to convince, having already pulled the covers back over his head. He’s snoring dramatically in an attempt to pretend he’s gone back to sleep.

George shakes his head, reaching up from his spot on the floor to grab Dream’s exposed ankle. With an encouraging nod from Drista, he starts pulling.

Dream is heavy, and it takes a great deal of effort to move him, but with one last enthusiastic tug, he comes tumbling off the bed... and directly onto George.

Ok, so he hadn’t quite thought that part through.

Aside from the initial “*mph!*” when he hit the ground, Dream shows no reaction, keeping his whole body limp and immovable. He is mostly sprawled across George’s stomach, arms folded over his chest, pillowing his face. He continues to fake snore.

“Dream, get off, you’re crushing me,” George groans, trying to squirm out from under him, to no avail. “Asshole.”

Dream throws one leg over him, and wraps both arms around his stomach tightly, eyes still stubbornly closed. A mischievous smile breaks through the snoring. Drista rolls her eyes and walks out of the room.

“I can’t deal with this right now,” she mutters. “Just be down in ten minutes tops.”

George doesn’t respond, too focused on trying not to think about Dream’s head on his chest and the leg pressing between his thighs.

“I can’t breathe you idiot,” George tries again once Drista is out of sight- a hot blush creeping up to his face. “Move.”

Dream edges his nose up to George’s neck, nudging him there and making him swallow hard.

“Dream-”

“Shh, I’m sleeping,” Dream says back, and George can feel the words whisper across his skin in thrilling little puffs of air. He shivers.

“We need to go down with the others,” George insists rather quietly and unconvincingly, every sense honed in on the barely there brushes of Dream’s cheek or nose against his collarbones.

“Let me hold you like this,” Dream replies, voice rough and honest and a little shy. He presses his forehead into the space where George’s neck meets his shoulder. “Please. Just for a little while.”

George’s heart swells, nearly beating out of his chest. He relaxes, letting his hand settle on the back of Dream’s head with a contented sigh.

“Okay. Just for a little while.”

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They untangle themselves eventually, with few words and flushed faces, Dream’s hands lingering around his waist.

“Merry Christmas,” Dream says finally, laying on the floor still, now facing him.

He’s close enough that George could count the individual freckles spattered over the bridge of his nose. He’s close enough that George could kiss him.

Dream wrinkles his nose a little when George reaches out with one finger, gently tracing the line of freckles.

“George,” Dream breathes, eyes fluttering closed.

George shushes him quietly, continuing to paint slow invisible trails across his face.

Dream’s whole body is tense, like a wound up spring waiting to be undone. It’s like he’s afraid to move in fear that George will pull away.

“Your eyelashes are long,” he remarks quietly, and Dream nods ever so slightly. George thumbs over his eyelids.

“And your nose is a little crooked.” He follows the bridge of his nose and Dream breathes deeply.

“Football accident,” he practically whispers, and George hums.

“Figured.”

He brushes away the hair hanging in Dream’s eyes, studying him. He takes in the golden curls and the strong jaw and the heavy smile lines.

“You look a lot like your dad,” he says softly, cupping the side of his face. “Your mum showed me pictures.”

Dream’s eyes flutter open, wide and shining. “You think so?” He utters, lips parted in surprise.

George smiles and nods, and Dream looks at him for a long moment. Then, he pulls George in close to his chest, burying his head in his shoulder.

“You’re wonderful,” he says, with a kind of tenderness that makes George’s breath hitch.

There’s more they could say, but Dream’s chest is too tight, and George can’t quite find the words.

So instead they hold each other until someone calls from downstairs for them to hurry up, and the smell of cinnamon and warm bread pushes them to their feet.

George feels a kind of aching when they separate, like a part of him is being torn away. Dream smiles and ruffles his hair and the ache settles within him, a sweet sort of pain that makes words die in your throat, never quite managing to reach your lips.

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Altogether, they make too much french toast for four people.

Julie insists that it will make for good leftovers, adding another six slices to the towering stack. They all laugh and shrug their shoulders, dishing up more for themselves.

Once breakfast has been eaten and put away, Drista starts tugging them into the living room one by one, bouncing on the balls of her feet.



“Hurry *up* , Dream,” she pesters, trying to push him out of the kitchen as he finishes off a glass of orange juice.

“I don’t think the presents are going anywhere,” Dream replies, nearly spilling on himself as Drista jostles him. “Hey, watch it!”

She retreats with a sigh, settling down in front of the lit Christmas tree and pulling packages out from under it. They’ve all gotten each other presents, making for a neat little stack.

Julie settles onto the couch next to George, sipping from the steaming red and green mug in hand. She’s still in her pajamas- a light blue color with snowflakes scattered across the surface. She tucks a piece of hair behind her ear, and grins over the top of her mug, watching Drista sort through the gifts.

Dream joins them on the couch, fighting off a yawn.

“These ones are for you, George,” Drista begins, dumping three presents in his lap, all different sizes. “And Mom, here’s yours.”

They both accept gratefully as Drista goes back for hers and Dream’s.

Once all the gifts have been properly divided up, Drista sits cross legged on the floor in front of them, looking pleased with herself.

“I can’t wait to see what you got me, Dris,” Dream remarks, turning the package covered in silver wrapping paper over in his hands.

Drista smiles mischievously, shrugging her shoulders as if to say, “*You’ll find out.*”

“Why don’t you go ahead and start then, Dream,” Julie says, nodding her head towards him.

“Yeah, go on,” Drista adds. “Open it.”

The present on Dream’s lap is relatively small, and rectangular. It’s topped with a beautiful red bow. He undoes the ribbon first, before tearing into the wrapping paper. George catches sight of a vaguely familiar DVD cover just as Dream does.

Dream immediately looks up towards the ceiling with a smirk, shaking his head while Drista giggles. He pulls out three movies, all with *High School Musical* splayed across the front. A complete set.

George vaguely remembers watching the first one while he was sick in bed one time, but can’t recall hardly any of the plot. The best he can remember, there was predictably a lot of singing, dancing, and teen angst.

“Wow Drista. And I mean *wow* ,” Dream says, sucking in air through his teeth.

“Now you have to watch them. No more excuses,” Drista replies with a shit-eating grin. “I will convert you one way or another.”

“They’re really not all that bad, Dream,” Julie chimes in with an amused expression. “I don’t know why you have such a grudge against them.”

Dream gapes at her with eyebrows raised. “Yes you do- I’ve made it abundantly clear! How are we forgetting that three month period of suffering after Drista first downloaded the soundtrack? She

played it *every day* , Mom. The *entire* thing! I felt like I was being held hostage in my own home!"

"Maybe you just didn't take the music to heart," George says with a sly shrug. "Drista, you had better play it for him again as a reminder."

Dream sputters at him just as Drista darts for the CD player in the kitchen. "Don't you dare," he says, catching her by the wrist. Drista cackles and gives in, sitting back down.

"You didn't even say thank you," she says, giving George a fist bump before pulling a blanket up to her shoulders. "Those cost a pretty penny, after all."

Dream sighs, getting down to give her an awkward hug, Drista remaining rolled up in the quilt. "Thank you for the wonderful gift you knucklehead," he says, and Drista smiles with satisfaction.

"Ok, who's next?" She chirps.

They go around the circle one by one, opening a wide variety of presents. Drista gets George a hideous American flag blanket- one with a hyper-realistic bald eagle taking up the center.

George pretends to gag when he first sees it while the rest of the family laughs.

"I'm converting you from your British ways," Drista insists, as George gives her a doubtful look.

Julie loves the perfume and new dish towels from Dream, making him blush with a big kiss on the cheek.

George follows with a simple box of chocolates, and Julie beams at him, acting like he handed her a box of gold nuggets instead. She chatters about how these are her favorite, and how they usually sell out so fast around Christmas time. George knows she might be exaggerating a little, but it makes him feel warm and appreciated nonetheless.

Julie buys the three of them matching Christmas sweaters, all several sizes too big. George and Drista are practically drowning in theirs, and Drista starts whacking people with the hanging sleeves. Dream looks relatively normal (and handsome) in his dark green, Christmas tree covered sweater, and George wonders at how silly he looks in his giant navy blue one, decorated with snowflakes and snowdrifts.

"Oh dear, the sizes seemed alright online," Julie says, tilting her head at them all worriedly.

"Oh no, they're great," George assures, wincing as Drista smacks him right in the face. He takes a swing back. "I buy all my sweaters big anyway."

"Well if you're sure," Julie replies, then quickly reaches for the phone in her pocket. "You all look so cute, I've got to take a picture," she says, backing up and making a waving motion.

Dream groans and Drista starts to argue, but it doesn't take long for them to give in, scooching in close on either side of George. Dream snickers as George attempts to push his sleeves up, and Drista gets in one last whack. He wraps one arm around George, who looks up in surprise.

"Relax," Dream says lightheartedly, pulling his arm back for a second. "It looks awkward if we're just sitting here. Now hurry and put your arms around us."

"Yeah, George, we don't bite," Drista adds, leaning into his side and plastering on a rather forced grin for the camera.

George hesitantly complies, and Dream nods in encouragement before looking forward.

“Say cheese!” Julie calls. None of them say it, but she snaps the photo anyway, giving them a thumbs up as a sign to untangle themselves.

Over the next half hour Dream unwraps a pair of much-needed new shoes, a sweatshirt for some football team George doesn’t recognize, and a fair amount of random kitchen utensils he hadn’t thought to bring to college this year. Drista opens some neon pink roller skates, a ridiculous amount of gummy candy, and a collection of records for her favorite band.

“The skates are from me...” Dream says proudly.

“And this is from me,” George interjects, handing over a circular present, which is soon revealed to be a matching helmet. Drista hides a laugh behind her hand at that and George folds his arms defensively. “Listen, if you’re going to be riding those around in town, you can never be too careful.”

“I think it’s a wonderful gift,” Julie says, and George nods his head towards her as if to say “*See*” .

After a still highly amused thank you, Drista reaches under the tree for the last three presents.

Drista’s gift for Julie and two others, George and Dream’s gifts for each other.

George swallows hard, suddenly feeling his hands go clammy. He really shouldn’t be this nervous—it’s not like he got Dream a wedding ring or anything, but still. This feels different from the rest. And then there’s the unanswered question of what Dream got *him* .

Maybe he should have got him something simpler. Less personal. A baseball cap or a gift card would have sufficed, surely.

He hardly registers Julie pulling tissue paper out of a bag containing some fuzzy slippers and bath salts, exclaiming and wrapping one arm around Drista happily.

Hardly registers Dream delicately placing a package in his lap.

“George?”

“Hm?” He looks up to find Dream waiting expectantly.

“Are you gonna open it?”

“Oh right,” George starts, and turns the gift over in his hands carefully.

It’s somewhat small, and rather dense. There’s no sound of sliding or scattering inside as he tilts it from side to side. The packaging is a shimmery white, with a blue ribbon.

“I hope you like it,” Dream mumbles, almost to himself, folding his hands carefully in his lap. George notices Dream’s knee is bouncing.

He unties the ribbon with care, tearing the wrapping paper at the meticulously folded edges. Dream seems to be holding his breath.

Inside is a book.

A book with a simple, yet beautiful illustrated cover depicting a young redhead girl and a shaggy looking dog, strolling down a dirt path in the evening sun. It’s hardbound, with the kind of cover

that makes a dry, *shhh* sound when you run your finger across it.

George does so, trailing across the words *Because of Winn Dixie* in light yellow lettering.

He smiles, whole body warm and tingling.

“I was gonna get you the movie,” Dream says in a nervous, hurried voice. “But I figured you’ve always preferred books, and well, then you see all the little things the movie people always leave out when they adapt it and-”

“It’s perfect,” George says quietly, still admiring the book.

He opens the cover and Dream looks away quickly, turning red.

“You left me a note?” He asks, and Dream shrugs.

“A few.”

George feels his heart skip a beat, and starts leafing through the pages. To his surprise, every few pages contain some kind of marking or comment in dark black ink. Some parts are underlined, or circled, one even has a little smiley face by it. A couple have commentary written in the margins.

*I thought you might like this part. It reminded me of that one story*

*you told about the crazy neighborhood kid.*

*My dad used to say this too haha. It used to drive me nuts.*

*Uh oh, not this part. Better not cry on your book.*

*Ignore any water damage. You’ll have to forgive me.*

George scans through them in passing, unable to wipe the smile off his face. Then, one underlined section catches his eye.

*“You can’t always judge people by the things they’ve done. You’ve got to judge them by what they are doing now.”*

George glances over at Dream, who’s watching with equal measure eagerness and shyness as George flits through the pages. Dream, who he’s hated and misjudged and cried over too many times.

Dream, who day after day keeps sharing these little pieces of his heart with him. Who sees him like his parents and bullies never did. Who missed a game winning catch because he was torn up at the

idea of George being miserable. Who lends him his jacket without asking, and laughs at his jokes (even the unfunny ones), and listens and doesn't laugh as he talks about kindergarten crushes.

Dream, who he's hopelessly in love with.

The boy from the party with the saccharine-sweet compliments and a bad reputation.

It's strange that they're one and the same.

George closes the book and smiles up at Dream.

"I love it. Thank you," he says softly, wrapping one arm around him to pull him in for a side hug- George's head laying against his shoulder.

Dream bends slightly to rest his cheek atop George's head, returning the gesture. "I'm glad," he breathes, all the nervousness going out of him. "Merry Christmas, George."

After a few moments, Drista pokes George's knee teasingly. "Hey. We've still got one more," she says, holding out Dream's gift with a smirk.

George's stomach plummets again, but he wills himself to stay calm, pulling away from Dream and passing the gift to him.

"Finish off Christmas morning for us, Number 22," he says, wavering a little as his stomach does flip flops.

Dream fiddles with the bright green tissue paper as he chuckles at the remark, before diving in.

First he pulls out the Warheads, which George had forgotten were even in there. He doesn't even know why Dream likes them, but he had dubbed them his favorite candy multiple times so what can you do?

Dream's face lights up as George grimaces. "Oh, I am definitely making you eat these with me," he says, wickedly.

"They taste like rocks. And they hurt my mouth."

"Exactly, and you make the funniest faces while eating them!" Dream chimes in, as Drista snickers.

"Whatever," George replies, and Dream sets the candy aside.

Pulling the tissue paper away, Dream looks back into the bag, eyebrows raised in curiosity.

"Is this...?"

George flushes, looking away. "It's not the original that I've used, but... yeah."

Dream pulls out a familiar homemade cookbook. There's no real cover, only a piece of cardstock with a chef's hat and a spoon printed on it. Underneath are the words *Vincent Family Recipes* written in large loopy letters.

He shakes his head in disbelief, laughing lightly.

They've used this very same cookbook for months now, trying out new recipes in both of their kitchens, marking down their favorites. Dream always wore the apron he had picked up on a whim

from the secondhand store, and George always teased him for it, calling him “my little housewife.”

They’ve leafed through these pages when neither of them have eaten all day, searching for the quickest dinner with the least amount of ingredients. Dream always seemed to be out of milk, which ruled out half of them.

“Looks like you had the same idea,” Dream remarks, looking through the book.

And they did.

Because on several of the pages, there are little notes in neat handwriting written into the margins.

*Don’t get distracted while you wait for it to start bubbling. If you leave the room and forget you’ll end up with it bubbling over.*

*I know vanilla smells good, but don’t go overboard. I promise it tastes better in small doses.*

*See! They are pancakes! Notice how there’s separate recipes for pancakes and crepes...*

*Your favorite :) Double the recipe if you want leftovers.*

Dream runs his finger across the notations, a fond look on his face.

“You can still use mine when you’re over at my place, obviously,” George comments. “But on nights that you’re not, I thought this might be of help.”

“You think of everything,” he mumbles, reading another note and grinning.

George shrugs. “Someone has to.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Dream insists upon going through every single page of the cookbook with George by his side, even when Julie gets up to nap and Drista goes outside to try her new roller skates.

“Why do you need me here?” George says lazily, lying on his back on the carpet, and toying with his sweater sleeves. “Can’t you read it on your own?”

“You don’t have anything better to do,” Dream replies calmly. “And besides, don’t you want to see my reactions? It’s your gift after all.”

“All you do is giggle, and when I ask you why you’re laughing you say it’s nothing.”

“Just stay, George, I’m lonely.”

George does stay. He does a lot of huffing, and rolling his eyes, and poking Dream’s feet and ankles with his toes, but he stays.

Once he finishes, Dream sets the book aside and picks George up unceremoniously. George yelps in surprise as he's wrapped in the massive bear hug, toes dangling a few inches off the ground.

"Thank you for the gift, Georgie. I really love it," he says, holding on until George starts swatting at him.

"Put me down you big lug," he says, and Dream complies, but keeps his hands on George's shoulders, looking on with a small smile.

"What?" George finally says.

"I don't know. I'm just really glad you're here." Dream's hands slide down George's arms a little at a time. Just as he's letting them fall away, George catches them, holding both hands in his and intertwining their fingers.

George softens a little, holding his gaze. "You already said that," he teases softly.

"Well, for the break, yes." Dream swings their arms a little. The grin on his face evens out into something a little more focused, as if he's working out a complicated puzzle in his head. When he speaks, it's quiet and thoughtful. "But I just mean general," he says, and it's a little like a confession. "I'm glad you're in my life."

George lets the words warm him, and doesn't hesitate to shuffle forward, resting his forehead against Dream's chest. Dream responds by leaning his chin down a little so he can rest it on the top of George's head, not wanting to let go of his hands.

"I'm glad too," George whispers.

Standing like that, in Dream's living room breathing his cologne and listening to his heartbeat feels like sheer vulnerability. Or weakness.

Standing there in his pajamas, with Dream's rough palm flat against his, George thinks maybe he's okay with that.

\*\*\*\*\*

For dinner it's roast, carrots, potatoes and sparkling cider.

For dessert it's pie, ice cream, homemade caramels and gingerbread.

They eat enough for six, seven, eight, laughing over plates piled high with Christmas goodies. They egg George on when he tries to pass on dessert number three, and argue over who gets the last few drops of Martinelli's.

The kitchen smells sweet and savory and warm even when the dishes have been cleared and the leftovers have been put away.

Julie sweeps and hums along to some crooning singer George doesn't recognize, as Drista shakes out the tablecloth outback.

Once the fridge is stocked full of tupperware containers, and the floor is spotless, Drista and Julie disappear upstairs to watch the new episode of some *Disney Plus* show Dream doesn't care for and George has only heard about in passing.

They're left alone in a place not too unfamiliar: side by side at the kitchen sink, washing dishes

together. Like clockwork, Dream rinses, and George dries, making a neat little stack on the counter next to him.

“You can go watch with them if you want,” Dream remarks, handing him another bowl. “I can handle the rest.”

George shakes his head easily, curling the dry dish towel around the porcelain rim. “I’d rather stay,” he says. “It’s no problem.”

Dream nods and goes back to washing as they fall into a companionable silence. The CD player continues spinning out soft piano and slow love songs. It’s the disc Julie had put in, still rolling through the songs in the album.

George likes it. It’s the kind of music that makes you sleepy, and maybe a little bit sad. The kind of music that sounds like longing.

George feels that longing with his whole chest.

It’s in the low strums of the guitar, and the little riffs of a jazz piano and the smooth, mournful voice spinning tales of love lost and times passed.

“Have you ever listened to Norah Jones before?” Dream says suddenly, as if reading George’s thoughts.

He blinks a few times, glancing toward the CD player. “I don’t think I’ve heard of her.”

Dream picks up a piece of silverware, running it under the water distractedly. “My mom has been playing her music for me since I was just a toddler.” He laughs lightly. “She’d hold me on one hip and play this album on repeat and while she made dinner and waited for my dad to get home.”

George imagines a Julie from twenty years ago, young and in love and carrying a three year old Dream, with chubby little legs and a tiny fist in his mouth.

The thought makes him smile. “That sounds really sweet,” George comments.

Dream nods, remembering. “She sang a lot quieter back then, like it was a private little show just for me. Sometimes I’d fall asleep on her like that. Other times, when I got older, I’d sing along with her.”

“Care to demonstrate?”

Dream snorts and shakes his head. “Not happening.”

George chuckles with him until they fall into silence again, settling into the sounds to the rushing water and slow music. The CD switches to the next track.

Dream listens quietly to the intro, plinking out a few high, delicate notes on the piano. Then he begins to speak again, softer this time.

“This one was my dad’s favorite,” he says, and George catches the corner of his lips pulling upward a little bit at the edges. Dream continues.

“I remember sometimes after Drista and I had been put to bed, I would sneak back down to the kitchen late at night.” The smile grows. Dream gets a faraway look in his eyes, turning off the water leaning against the edge of the sink on his elbows. “And I’d watch them dance.”



George tilts his head ever so slightly. “Your parents?”

Dream nods. “They wouldn’t say anything, just stand there swaying.” He tilts his head back, gazing at the ceiling. “I didn’t really know what they were doing, but it always made me feel happy, seeing them like that. It was like being in on some special secret.”

George breathes in the sight of him for a moment- pictures the couple turning slowly across the tile many years ago. And then the longing becomes too much.

“Show me.”

The words feel heavy on his tongue, but he doesn’t take them back.

Dream looks surprised at first, hearing George’s voice break through the silence. But when George reassures him with a light touch to the arm, and a subtle nod he steps away from the counter, taking George with him.

Neither of them can bear to look away as they move slowly into the more open part of the kitchen, staying connected through little brushes against elbows and fingertips.

Dream is surprisingly steady as he guides George’s hand to his shoulder, gliding up his bare arm and onto the rough fabric of his T-shirt. He feels the muscles beneath it move as Dream draws George in, settling his free hand easily at George’s waist.

“I haven’t danced much,” George barely whispers as Dream slowly intertwines their fingers.

“Doesn’t matter,” Dream replies, with a soft smile. “Just trust your instincts.”

“I can’t focus on my instincts when I’m touching you,” George says without thinking, and immediately reddens in embarrassment. “Okay. Ignore that.”

“Am I that distracting?” Dream hums with a raised eyebrow, pulling him a little closer, until they’re practically leaning on each other.

George takes in a sharp breath at the sensation, turning his face away and burying it in Dream’s shoulder. “Yes. Yes you are.”

“Noted,” Dream replies, tilting his head so his chin just brushes the top of George’s hair, close enough that George can feel each exhale.

Then, he begins to sway.

There’s no real pattern to it, and it’s hard to follow at first, but soon George relaxes into the rhythm, letting Dream lead him in slow circles.

Slow guitar and gentle piano fills the space, until the rest of the world starts to fade away. Suddenly all the inhibitions and worries that have made a home in George’s mind seem fuzzy and unimportant. What’s important is the way Dream’s thumb is brushing over the back of his hand, and how his lips press against his hair.

The song changes and they keep dancing, hyperfocused on the other’s presence, and the little side steps across the floor.

George isn’t sure if it’s been minutes or an hour. Isn’t sure when both of his arms found their way around Dream’s neck. One finger absentmindedly tracing along the nape, where his hair is soft and

curled.

Dream shifts just barely and George tightens his hold, whispering a hasty, “*Please don’t let go.*”

Dream shushes him, running a soothing hand up his side.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he breathes in reply, and George lets out a shaky breath, nodding against him.

A part of his brain knows that soon enough they’ll have to break away, and finish the dishes in the sink, and leave this shared home to go back to their own empty apartments.

It’s easy to pretend to be old lovers in this low kitchen light, but George knows that once the music stops they will return to the dull ache of *friends* . Friends who don’t know each other the way lovers do. Friends who look away when they’re caught staring, who will always have to separate.

But the music hasn’t stopped yet.

So George will pretend.

## Chapter End Notes

The song that Dream and George dance to at the end is [Come Away With Me](#) by Norah Jones. Some of my earliest childhood memories were spending time in the kitchen with my mom and her kitchen CD player listening to that very same album, dancing and singing along with it. It holds a special little place in my heart, and thought it would be fun to include that as part of Dream's childhood as well. :)

Also yes, Drista and Julie are definitely hooked on High School Musical the Musical the Series. :)

Find me on [Twitter](#)!

## Chapter 9

### Chapter Summary

They fall back into silence as they near Dream's car, and George feels the inexplicable pressure to say something, anything before he leaves. Something to remind Dream that he is interested, despite his previous hesitation.

"You planning to kiss anyone on New Years?" He blurts out, and immediately feels shock and regret travel down to his toes.

He's been meaning to be more bold, but maybe this is too bold.

If anything, Dream seems rather pleased. The man smirks a little, cheeks going slightly pink.

"Hmm, let me think," he says, placing a finger on his chin.

George waits with bated breath, shifting anxiously on his feet as they reach Dream's car.

"I guess you'll just have to show up to the party and find out," Dream finally says, ducking quickly into the driver's seat.

George lets out a frustrated huff.

Always a tease.

### Chapter Notes

Another long wait for this one, sorry!

We're getting close to the end here folks, I'll be sad to finish this fic, but I'm excited for all of you to see where the story is going to go! As always thank you for all the support and comments. I read each and every one and they inspire me to keep writing! You guys rock! Let me know what you thought of this chapter in the comments ;)

Thank you to [Logan](#) and [Honk](#) for betaing!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They stay at the Bennett house for another day to pack before heading back home.

It's strange how much it hurts to say goodbye to Julie and Drista-who George has known for less than two weeks. He drags his feet all through packing, hoping to prolong the inevitable a little longer.

George isn't sure if it makes things easier or harder when Julie hugs him tightly in the doorway,

assuring him that he's welcome anytime, and that they'll have him over for dinner again soon.

He thanks her, promising to visit.

When he goes to hug Drista, she instead yanks him into the other room, claiming he left a sock under the couch.

There's no sock though, and Drista instead pulls him down to sit and looks him intensely in the eye.

"You have to promise to tell him," she says earnestly, hand still wrapped around George's wrist.

He feels goosebumps prickles across his flesh at the request and sighs, looking away. "I can't promise that."

"You can," Drista pushes, "And you should."

"It's not that simple," George replies, glancing worriedly at the doorway. "And besides, I don't *need* him to know, Drista." He gives her a look that's meant to be comforting, but Drista's frown remains. "I'm lucky to have him as a friend, and I don't want to ruin that."

When Drista doesn't seem convinced, he continues.

"Listen. Your brother is going to finish college, get married, and have lots of little nieces and nephews for you to love and play with. And I'm going to be there for all of it, if he'll let me. But I'm not going to screw both of us over by telling him about my little crush."

It's not a little crush, and they both know it. But Drista doesn't correct him.

She's quiet for a moment, loosening her grip around George's wrist, but leaving the touch there.

"What if he confesses first?" She says finally, and it startles George a little bit. "You expect me to believe you'll just leave him hanging and break his heart?"

George huffs a little. "Well that's different."

"What will you do then, George?" Drista questions, raising her eyebrows meaningfully.

"If by some miracle Dream confessed his undying love for me, yes of course I would reciprocate," he replies, a little exasperated. "But that's not going to-"

"Okay, that's all I need to know." Drista stands, letting go of George entirely.

"You had better not-"

"I'm not going to meddle or force anything," she interjects with an eye roll, and George lets out a little sigh of relief. "But I've seen the way he looks at you. And my brother isn't necessarily the best at hiding his feelings. I just wanted to make sure you weren't going to self sabotage or anything dumb like that."

"What does that mean?" George narrows his eyes at the girl, but she's already turned away from him, headed for the hallway.

"It means that soon enough, you both will have to come to terms with your feelings, one way or another. And I wanted to make sure you're ready for that," she explains over one shoulder, giving George a look that seems to say *duh*.

George wishes he could be as self assured as the fifteen year old, but knows that's not happening anytime soon. Still, something about her confidence does manage to ease his worries in an odd way.

He follows her back into the front entryway, where Dream and Julie are waiting with expectant smiles. They both look a little confused though, after eyeing his and Drista's empty hands.

"The sock...?" Dream asks curiously, and George feels his stomach drop a little.

*Oops .*

Drista shrugs, grabbing George's suitcase and pulling it through the front door.

"Couldn't find it," she says, and George shakes his head in amusement before offering Dream and Julie an identical shrug.

"Couldn't find it," he mimics, grabbing a random bag and heading to the car, a small mischievous smile breaking through on his face.

\*\*\*\*\*

The apartment feels empty.

Jack is still away with his family, taking his rambunctiousness with him and leaving the place all too quiet.

After Callahan watches George wander in and out of the living room for the fifth time he suggests they order pizza and watch a movie, much to George's relief.

It's a nice distraction, and for a little while, he's almost able to forget the conversation with Drista and the unpacked suitcase.

They're halfway through the movie, and Callahan has just finished explaining the insane holiday trip he took with some friends when he pauses, tilting his head just slightly at George.

"*What's up?*" he mouths, and George flushes in embarrassment at having zoned out.

"*Nothing. Continue,*" he signs back quickly, but Callahan shakes his head, already replying with a knowing look.

"*Something's on your mind.*"

George pauses the movie that they weren't really watching anyway and flops back further into the couch cushions.

He struggles to find any possible way to explain his complex and confusing emotional state, and why he's there in the first place, before settling for, "*Boy problems.*"

Callahan quirks his lips a little, before turning on George's phone. Two unopened texts from Dream are lit up in the notification box.

George scoffs and snatches the phone away while Callahan laughs.

"*Are you dating?*" He asks, and George signs back a lazy, "*No.*"

"*Whose fault is that?*" Callahan raises an eyebrow.

George waves him off. *"He doesn't like me."*

Another notification comes in with a new text from Dream.

Callahan looks at it then back to the T.V.

*"Sure."*

Before he can press play again, George grabs the remote and waits for Callahan to look back at him.

*"What do I do?"*

*"Kiss him."*

George throws his hands up in exasperation repeating an emphatic, *"No."*

Callahan thinks for a moment before signing again. *"Let him kiss you."*

George is about to interrupt when Callahan continues.

*"Use mistletoe."*

George taps the date on his phone. *"Christmas ended, idiot."*

He signs something else that George doesn't quite recognize. He shakes his head in confusion, and Callahan opts to finger spell it instead.

*"N-E-W-Y-E-A-R-S."*

*Oh.*

*New Year's Eve.*

He's kissed people on New Year's Eve before. Boyfriends in the comfort of his living room, under mountains of blankets with glasses of wine, as well as strangers he met an hour ago at a party, both of them wasted and eager.

He pictures it. Dream pulling him in as the clock strikes midnight, lips firmly meeting his. Dream kissing him in front of all their friends without a care in the world. Dream kissing him like he loves him.

It's a dangerous train of thought, and he tries to push it away.

George shoves Callahan lightly, turning the movie back on without another word. His roommate chuckles, smiling at George's obviously flushed face before letting the topic drop, sure to question him further another day.

But no matter how hard George tries to focus on what's playing on the T.V., he can't shake the phantom feeling of Dream's lips on his.

\*\*\*\*\*

By the 27th, Karl is back in town, George has unpacked and everything is starting to feel normal again.

Except for the godforsaken fantasies about kissing Dream.

There are multiple variations that swirl around George's head at this point. In some daydreams Dream leads him outside and kisses him in flurries of freshly fallen snow, the lights and sounds of a party fading into the background. In others they're both drunk with loose tongues, and Dream professes his love dramatically in a crowded room before sweeping him up. George has imagined kissing Dream against every surface of his house, in his car, under the bleachers, and everywhere in between and it's starting to get reasonably distracting.

For this reason, he hasn't had Dream over, or even had a conversation with him beyond texting since he was dropped off after Christmas.

George isn't sure if it's the fear of what he will do when Dream inevitably doesn't kiss him on New Years, or the tiny thrilling wonder of what would happen if he did.

He tries to not address that barely noticeable, beating part of his heart, but he can't quite manage to crush it after the things Drista and Julie have said... after the moments of quiet with just him and Dream.

Because if you pretend someone loves you long enough, sometimes you start to fool even yourself.

It felt real then- in the kitchen with Dream's arms wrapped around him, voices a bare hum over the music. And George can't quite shake the sensation.

But he can, and he will. It will just take time.

\*\*\*\*\*

Karl clambers into George's car unannounced just as he's about to shift it into drive.

"What the hell, Karl?!" He practically hollers, slamming the gear shift back up to prevent the car from rolling forward. His friend doesn't seem phased.

"I'm back! Did you miss me?" Karl exclaims in a sing-song voice, throwing his arms around George while he still has one hand on the wheel. The positioning is awkward, but George manages to calm down enough to smile warily and return the hug.

"Hi Karl," he sighs, doing little to hide his exasperation.

Karl grins and falls back into his seat, pointing forward. "Start driving."

"Where?" George asks.

"Anywhere. Nowhere. I could not care less." Karl stretches his arms behind his head. "Just give us something to do while I explain to you the mind numbing intricacies of sharing one cabin with fourteen children, and *you* tell me all the details of your little lovers' retreat."

George rolls his eyes, but shifts back into drive regardless. "I don't understand how spending Christmas with someone's family is a lovers' retreat, but alright."

"It was an *opportunity*, is what it was," Karl replies. "One that I hope you didn't waste. Please say you made a move. Or he made a move. I am going to die if neither of you even *tried* to make a move."

George simply shrugs. "Define a move."

“C’mon George. You’ve got to work with me here. Did you or did you not gaze into each other’s eyes under the Christmas lights, before leaning in and-”

George hits the breaks a little too hard and Karl jolts forward with a flustered “*Hey!*”

“Sorry,” George mumbles with little remorse. When Karl is settled again and back to staring at George- waiting for an answer- he sighs.

“Look, we didn’t kiss or anything,” George begins hesitantly, “But yeah, I guess you could say some stuff happened.”

Karl’s face breaks into a smile and he leans forward. “I knew it. Tell me everything.”

So George does. Rather distractedly, and taking care to leave out some of the more personal moments, he tells Karl about the little ice skating date-not-date, the gifted annotated book, the late night conversations. He tells him about the Bennett family, and how quickly they accepted him. George doesn’t mention that night in the kitchen, for reasons he can’t explain, or Drista’s ultimatum given minutes before he left the house.

Karl doesn’t seem bothered, eating up every detail with wide eyes.

They’re parked now, drinking milkshakes in the front seat quietly, now that Karl has finished asking every question he can think of about the trip.

All except one, apparently.

“George.”

George glances over at him, taking another sip. “Hm?”

Karl’s expression turns earnest, almost serious. “You know he’s in love with you, right?”

The shake turns to sludge in his throat and he coughs a few times. “What?”

Karl continues staring. “Like, you get that much by now surely. I mean, I had assumed as much for a while, but now it’s getting to be obvious. He clearly has feelings for you.”

George slides his gaze away. “Karl,” he says, warning in his tone.

“I’m serious,” Karl replies. “He’d probably kiss you on the spot if you’d let him. You’re probably just sending mixed signals so he’s holding back.”

As nerve-wracking as it is, George supposes Karl could have a point. He hasn’t pushed away Dream’s affection, but he hasn’t been the most open or receptive either. It’s all been reserved touches and soft words, easily mistaken as platonic.

“Maybe you’re right,” he admits, resting his chin in his hand.

“I know you, which is why I’m definitely right,” Karl says, resting a comforting hand on George’s shoulder. “And hey, I’m not saying you need to do anything crazy just, I don’t know, don’t be afraid to let him in. I think he’s just unsure.”

George finally meets Karl’s eyes and nods subtly, which seems to satisfy him.

Karl loudly slurps up the rest of his milkshake, before setting it aside and stretching in his seat.

“Well then, now that we’ve gotten that taken care of, you get to hear about my trip, which had a lot



less wholesome family bonding than yours did, and a lot more spilled casserole dishes.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The group plans the New Years Eve party over dinner, with Quackity stealing everyone’s leftover fries, and Sapnap struggling to pay attention as Karl threads his fingers through his hair.

They’re all shoved into a long booth at one of the local burger joints, and at this point it’s mostly George, Dream, and Karl leading the conversation. Bad might have been helpful as well, had he not agreed to every idea presented regardless of if he actually liked it.

It’s weird being back in a group setting with Dream, where every one of their actions could be scrutinized. It makes George a little nervous, but he’s glad to be around him again after a few days’ absence.

“I’m telling you, we can do it at my apartment,” Karl insists. “My roommates are just a little picky about messes, so we’d have to be careful.”

“I don’t know Karl, that sounds like it’s gonna be stressful for you,” Dream says in return. “Plus you host a lot. I feel bad.”

“Skeppy’s family has a really cool basement! Maybe I could ask him!” Bad speaks up and George grimaces.

“I don’t think that Skeppy’s mother is going to want a bunch of drunk college kids partying in her basement,” he replies.

“Then we just won’t drink.”

“We’re drinking,” Sapnap interjects, giving Bad a look. “New Year’s parties are shit without alcohol.”

Bad sighs, sitting back in his seat. “Ok so not Skeppy’s.”

“We could come to mine?” George finally says, regretting the words as soon as they’re out of his mouth.

“Sounds good to me,” Quackity says, waving a waiter over to get their bill. “Now can we please go? This conversation has been dragging along for an hour.”

“Hold on one second, Q,” Dream interrupts, looking warily down at George. “Are you sure? You don’t even like parties all that much.”

George shrugs. “Yeah it’s fine I guess. As long as you’re all fine with Jack and Callahan maybe tagging along, and don’t break anything.”

Sapnap chuckles. “We’re not throwing a rager or anything, George. It’ll basically just be us six.”

George raises an eyebrow. “You say that as if us six couldn’t single-handedly destroy a building.”

“We won’t break anything, George,” Karl assures, giving Sapnap a lighthearted shove. “As long as you’re okay with it, your place sounds great.”

They pay for the food with little fanfare, and finalize any last details.

“You’re good to bring chips, Quackity?” Karl calls as they head to their cars, and Quackity gives a

thumbs up. “And Bad, you said you’ve got decorations?”

George lets out a tired sigh as their voices get farther away, and Dream chuckles.

“Party planning is quite the ordeal isn’t it?” He asks, shoving his hands in his pockets and walking alongside him.

George shakes his head in amusement. “I’m pretty sure it’s ten times harder with this group. But yeah, it is. I’m just impressed we managed to decide on anything.”

“Go us,” Dream says, holding his hand out for a fist bump.

George accepts. “Go us.”

They fall back into silence as they near Dream’s car, and George feels the inexplicable pressure to say something, *anything* before he leaves. Something to remind Dream that he is interested, despite his previous hesitation.

“You planning to kiss anyone on New Years?” He blurts out, and immediately feels shock and regret travel down to his toes.

He’s been meaning to be more bold, but maybe this is *too* bold.

If anything, Dream seems rather pleased. The man smirks a little, cheeks going slightly pink.

“Hmm, let me think,” he says, placing a finger on his chin.

George waits with bated breath, shifting anxiously on his feet as they reach Dream’s car.

“I guess you’ll just have to show up to the party and find out,” Dream finally says, ducking quickly into the driver’s seat.

George lets out a frustrated huff.

*Always a tease.*

Dream rolls down the window to grin at him.

“I’ll see you Friday,” he says, in a tone that’s both infuriating and effortlessly charming. George simultaneously wants to strangle him and kiss him senseless.

*“You see Karl! I’m trying and this is what I get,”* he thinks to himself, but Dream is already waving goodbye as he drives off.

George waves back, trying to not feel too defeated.

After all, there’s always the promise of Friday night, Dream’s eyes on him as the clock ticks down to midnight.

George supposes he can wait a couple of days.

\*\*\*\*\*

The rest of the party preparations fly by all too quickly.

When George checks in with Callahan and Jack to make sure they’re fine having the party at their

apartment he halfway hopes one or both of them will shoot him down, claiming it will be too noisy or messy.

But both are enthused, even offering to help set up as long as they can hang around for the duration.

“Are you sure?” George asks once more, leaning against the countertop as Jack stirs a pot of ramen.

He’s not even sure why he’s so hesitant about this. It’s not like he hasn’t had guests before, and it’s only going to be their friends there.

*“It’s easier to escape someone else’s house if things go badly with Dream,”* his brain supplies, and with a sinking feeling in his gut he knows it’s the truth.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Jack groans, giving George a look over his shoulder. “I think it’ll be loads of fun, so stop asking, George. You sound like my mum when she gets stressed.”

“Okay, fine, fine,” George huffs, pacing back to the table. “I’m just nervous, I guess.”

Jack lifts up the wooden spoon, twirling it lazily. “What’s there possibly to be nervous about? Your weirdo football friends getting hammered and throwing up everywhere?”

“I hadn’t even thought about that,” George replies under his breath, resting his forehead against the table.

“Aw c’mon Gogs, I’m sure it will be fine. You’ll laugh, you’ll drink, you’ll kiss, and then you’ll pass out on the couch and forget about all of it.”

He lifts his head up for a moment. “Who exactly would I be kissing?”

Jack freezes, then laughs awkwardly.

“Jack...” George says, eyes narrowing.

“The rookie quarterback guy...? The one that follows you around everywhere,” Jack replies carefully, offering a convincing smile.

One by one, the dots connect.

“Oh God... Callahan told you, didn’t he?”

Jack deliberates, shifting from foot to foot. “Well technically he didn’t *tell* me as much as *texted* it to me.”

George groans, letting his head drop back onto the table, and covering his face with his arms. “I’m going to kill him.”

Jack starts towards him, chuckling lightly. “Now it’s not all that bad! We’ll be great wingmen for you, George, don’t you worry.”

“That’s exactly what I’m worried about.”

“I’m serious! We’ll distract everyone and get them out of the apartment-”

George’s eye catches on the pot of water. “Jack-”

“-Then you guys can have some alone time and-”

“ *Jack* .”

“I’ll have Callahan hook up to the speaker and play some mood music and- no George, let me finish-” Jack opens his mouth to say more but is cut off once again.

“Ok, *what* ?”

George sighs loudly, and finally points at the stove.

“Your water is boiling over.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Dream calls the morning of December 31st when George is brushing his teeth, hair still dripping from his shower.

He picks up after a couple of rings, setting the phone on the countertop as he finishes.

“George?” Dream asks after a moment, his face appearing on the screen, clearly confused at the blank white ceiling.

“One minute,” George replies, but isn’t sure how much comes across with the toothbrush in his mouth.

Dream at least pretends to understand, waiting patiently until George finally picks up the phone and goes to flop onto his bed.

“Hi,” he says, breathlessly, laying back on the comforter.

Dream takes a second or two to respond, an odd expression on his face.

George looks at him expectantly through the screen. “What?”

“Nothing, sorry,” he says, cheeks flushed. “I just, your uh- hair. Your hair, it um... surprised me.”

Dream winces as he finishes speaking and George quirks an eyebrow, reaching a hand up to his dark hair.

“I mean, it’s just wet,” he replies, tugging on a few of the strands. “I don’t know what’s so surprising about it.”

Dream rubs his face with his palm and shakes his head a few times. “Uh yeah, I just- um, forget I said anything,” he fumbles.

George turns over on his side, holding the phone in front of him. “Alright...” he says, tucking his arm under his head to lay on it. “So is that the reason you called or...”

“Oh right! Sorry. That’s not why,” Dream replies quickly.

His expression sombers slightly and George frowns.

“I actually wanted to talk to you about the party tonight,” Dream continues, rubbing the side of his neck absentmindedly. It’s a nervous habit he has, George knows.

*Why is he nervous?*

“Do you need a ride or something? ‘Cause I can pick you up,” George supplies when Dream doesn’t continue, but his friend is already shaking his head.

“No no, I’m good on the ride I just-”

George worries his lip between his teeth, interrupting.

“Dream, just tell me.”

“I can’t come tonight.”

*Oh .*

George freezes, feeling like he’s just been punched in the gut.

“At least not for the first part,” Dream says hurriedly. “I should be able to make it later- I really want to be there I swear-”

“Why not?”

Dream pauses, sucking in air through his teeth. “Well, the team is doing this thing tonight.”

George tries not to flinch. “The football team?”

“Yeah,” Dream says, looking away. “It’s- I mean, it was kind of last minute, but the new captain is hosting it and he invited everyone as some kind of team bonding thing?”

“And you’re required to go.”

“Well, no,” Dream starts, running a hand through his hair. “But stuff like this is a good chance to get in with the upperclassmen, and a lot of times they’re the ones who influence who gets played behind the scenes.”

A droplet of water trickles off the back of George’s hair and down his neck. He shivers.

“You only have what? Like three or four games left right?” He questions, trying to keep his tone even.

Dream sees past it, pursing his lips. “I mean, yeah, but there’s next season to think about too.”

“You’re good, Dream. They’re gonna play you. They’re gonna play you whether or not you go to this stupid party.”

There’s a sort of blackness rolling in his gut now. Anger and jealousy and bitterness turning his words cold.

Dream’s face hardens. “It’s not a stupid party, George. I thought I explained that,” he huffs. “I wouldn’t go if it was just a stupid party. It’s an opportunity. And besides I already said I’m still coming to our thing. It’s not that big of a deal.”

*“It is a big deal,” George wants to snap back. “You chose them. You chose those homophobic dickheads from that day after practice over your real friends. Over the people that actually give a shit about you. Over me.”*

But he knows that's unfair. Just because a couple of the guys on the football team suck, that doesn't make them all assholes. And really, this is over a party. A party that he planned, and was looking forward to, sure, but a simple party nonetheless.

Plus there's no reason Dream won't at least make it by midnight, right?

"Okay, okay," George finally says, letting out a heavy sigh. "I shouldn't have gotten upset." He attempts a teasing smile, breathing deep. "I guess it's only fair that we don't get to steal you away all the time."

Dream still looks sullen, worried.

"Are you sure you're okay with it?" He asks, bringing his thumbnail to his mouth.

George is about to chide him to not bite his nails, but he's already pulling it away. George's smile softens.

"Yeah. I'm sure."

"I'm really sorry, George," Dream says, still frowning, but seeming a bit more relaxed. "I just feel like I should at least make an appearance over there."

"No, no, I get it," George assures, then waits for Dream's eyes to find his through the screen.

When they do, Dream's frown dissipates, replaced with calm attentiveness.

George continues. "You go have fun, and then we can ring in the new year together, right?" He smiles. He expects some lighthearted teasing comment from Dream about trying to trick him into a kiss, or how George is going to be asleep by then anyways, but instead Dream's face turns serious again.

"Oh yeah, that reminds me- um, I kind of have something I want to talk to you about tonight once I get there."

The hand travels back to his neck, rubbing little circles. George watches, mouth going dry. His stomach turns again.

"Is that alright?"

He snaps back to look at Dream.

George nods weakly. "Of course," he says, trying to sound unaffected.

Dream takes in a shaky breath, lips turning upward slightly. "Okay. Great. Um, I guess I'll talk to you then?"

His tongue feels like cotton in his mouth, thick and heavy.

"Yeah. Talk to you then."

George hangs up the phone and rests it on his stomach, ignoring how he suddenly feels sick.

"It'll be fun," he speaks to no one.

*Why is his throat so tight?*

“It’ll be fun,” he repeats quietly. “You’ll laugh, you’ll drink, you’ll kiss, and then you’ll pass out on the couch and forget about all of it.”

That is, unless Dream plans to reject him tonight.

\*\*\*\*\*

It doesn’t take long for guests to arrive, covering George’s table and countertops with bags of chips, soda, and drinks.

Bad compliments the decorations as soon as he walks in, which are really just streamers taped across random cupboards and pieces of furniture, plus a couple cardstock “Happy New Year!”s that Callahan had printed.

Still, it feels festive and lively, more so than George thinks the apartment has ever been. It’s a nice change of pace.

He’s surprised when Sappnap shows up, Karl at his side and a case of beer in his offhand.

“Aren’t you going to the football captain’s thing?” George asks, trailing after Sappnap as he sets the beer down and takes off his jacket.

“Oh hell no,” Sappnap replies easily, laying the letterman over one of the chairs. “You really think I’d want to spend an entire night hearing that guy talk about himself while his mindless followers go get wasted and hook up with someone in the bathroom? Yeah, no thanks.” He chuckles, sitting down on the couch next to Karl.

George swallows hard. “Right, of course not.”

*Well when he puts it like that....*

Someone knocks at the door and George turns towards it, making a move to stand. Sappnap interrupts him.

“Wait hold on, how did you know about it?” He asks, and George winces.

“He probably got an invite you idiot,” Karl interjects, nudging his boyfriend. “You forget that unlike you, George is popular.” He winks at George while Sappnap rolls his eyes goodnaturedly at the jab.

George isn’t quite able to return the grin.

“But isn’t it just like, for the team? Team bonding and all that,” he mumbles, Dream’s words bouncing around his head.

Sappnap waves him off. “Nah, it’s more or less just your everyday social-ladder climbing booze-fest. Usually it’s only the six foot something, status-obsessed egomaniacs that are welcome.”

George plays with his hands, opening and closing them. “Were you invited?”

“Invited? Yes, technically. But they wouldn’t want me there. I don’t get enough playing time for these guys to give a shit,” he pauses, scoffing a little before putting his arm around the boy beside him.

“*Plus*, now that Karl and I are official, a couple of them have been assholes about it.”

Karl sends a wary glance Sapnap's way, but Sapnap is quick to squeeze his shoulder in comfort. "Nothing serious. Just your everyday nonsense. I just ignore it and avoid them whenever I can."

The knocking at the door has become insistent now, and George can hear Quackity complaining loudly on the other side.

"Sorry I've got to-" he mumbles, shuffling towards the door numbly.

"Right, sorry," Sapnap replies, gesturing for him to go ahead. Out of the corner of his eye he can see Karl turn fully towards his boyfriend, starting to whisper something, expression concerned. Sapnap merely pulls him in closer, shaking his head and kissing Karl on the cheek.

It makes George's heart twist painfully.

"Damn, took you long enough," Quackity says once George opens the door, and he attempts a smile.

"Sorry, Q. Come on in."

\*\*\*\*\*

They're an hour into the party before anyone notices Dream's absence.

It's in the middle of a rather raucous game of poker when Callahan glances around at the group in realization, shifting his cards into one hand so he can sign, then making eye contact with George.

"*Dream?*" Callahan asks.

George presses his lips together and shakes his head subtly.

Callahan gives him a confused look and George deliberates how best to explain it without drawing attention.

"*Late?*"

George coughs pointedly, and Callahan leans back in his chair in frustration.

"George?"

Bad's voice makes him jump.

"Hm?"

"It's your turn."

Callahan is still looking at him expectantly.

"Oh um, sorry. Uh... Fold," he says, without looking at his cards.

When he still doesn't respond, Callahan turns to Jack next to him in exasperation, nudging him gently.

George internally groans as he finger spells Dream's name to their other roommate.

It takes two tries, but on the second go around, Jack makes an expression of recognition before looking around the table. His brows furrow as he realizes who's missing.



“Hold on, where's Dream, guys?” He asks, as Quackity lays down his hand.

At his words the rest of their friends start looking around similarly in realization.

“Maybe he's just running late?” Bad offers, but Sapnap shakes his head.

“He would have told one of us, I'm sure.”

Several eyes flicker to George. Karl's stay focused on him when the others move away.

“It's not a big deal, Sap,” George tries calmly but Sapnap cuts back in.

“No, we talked just the other day, he had plans to-”

His eyes find George, and the words trail off, hanging heavily in the air. Sapnap looks away just as quickly, looking embarrassed, almost guilty.

So Sapnap knows too.

That's okay. He doesn't need his pity.

He just wishes everyone would quit side-eyeing him like he's got the plague or something. He wishes someone would break the silence.

The room remains deathly still, teetering on a precipice of unbroken eggshells.

So George does it himself.

“Who cares if Dream is here or not?”

It hurts. Saying his name with indifference, with coldness. The words taste foreign in his mouth.

“He's an adult, he can do whatever he pleases,” George presses on, chin jutted out and shoulders squared. “We can still have a great night without him, okay?”

Bad opens his mouth to say something but George cuts him off with a quick look.

“It's fine. Let's just play the game.”

Bad slouches back into his seat worriedly and Karl frowns.

George tosses a pretzel at Jack, who's looking equal measures confused and chastened.

“Jack. Your turn.”

The sophomore doesn't argue, clearing his throat once before offering the group a weak smile and laying down his hand. “Uh, Straight Flush.” He collects the coins pooling in the center with steady hands, not daring to raise his eyes from the table.

No one reacts.

George stands, grabbing a bottle of cheap vodka from the countertop and his jacket.

Too late he realizes the hoodie isn't his own.

With sickness swirling in his stomach, he places it back on the rack near the door, not bothering to pick it up when it slips off.

"I'm going for a walk," he manages, and then the door is clicking shut behind him.

\*\*\*\*\*

Karl follows, because of course he does. Shuffling up the walk until he's directly behind George, hovering at the bench where he sits with the bottle curled into his side.

Karl doesn't say anything, placing his hands gently on George's shoulders, before leaning over to drape his arms around his neck.

He embraces him like that for a while, and George leans into the touch, laying his cheek against the crook of Karl's elbow.

The silence here feels fuller, softer, and George lets it envelope him.

Soon, Karl joins him on the bench, and they pass the vodka back and forth, with Karl drinking little, and George making up the difference.

There are things that could be said, George knows- questions Karl wants to ask... but he doesn't. He speaks in kind touches, and quiet company, and though it does little to soothe the ache, it's all George could ever ask for.

When the voices in his head are dulled, and fuzzy, and his toes feel numb despite the Florida heat, Karl leads him back inside, his arms slung around George's shoulders.

There are curious glances when he walks in the door, but the tension that had previously been there has dissipated, leaving tipsy conversation and warm laughter. The jacket is back in its place on the hook.

With Karl at his side, he rejoins the party with earnest smiles, able to once again breathe easy.

And if there's an absence there, George doesn't feel it.

\*\*\*\*\*

By the time Dream arrives, the streamers are peeling off the walls and the drinks are gone, save for a few empty beer cans. The last of the guests filtered out about an hour ago, leaving the apartment dark and still.

At first George thinks it's Quackity coming back to pick up the serving bowl he left behind, and calls for the guest at the door to just come in, not wanting to get up from his place splayed across the couch. Maybe if he stays here, half asleep under the blankets, Quackity won't stay to talk his ear off in the process of grabbing his things.

But it's not Quackity who steps inside, taking in the empty room in miserable silence. The figure is too tall, enters too quietly.

George knows it's him within moments- can recognize the slope of his shoulders, and the unruly hair from miles away, even in the dim light filtering in from the hallway.

George sits up quickly once he notices, but soon regrets it as the room starts to tilt slightly, making his head pound. He tries to look at the clock, but the numbers won't quite seem to go into focus. It's late. He knows it's late.

Dream remains frozen in the entryway, seemingly torn between staring at George, or his tattered

sneakers. There's a bouquet of flowers in his hand, crushed on one side. The pale blue dress shirt has come untucked from his pants.

There's a part of George that just wants to pull the blanket back over his head until Dream leaves, taking the jacket and the flowers and everything else with him. Because maybe then, he won't have to hear Dream speak. Maybe then, Dream won't come back, and they can pretend that nothing ever needed to be said.

But something cold and twisted inside of him wants to just let him stand there, and *needs* to know how this ends.

"George," Dream starts, taking a step toward him until he thinks better of it. Instead he opts to shift nervously on his feet, hand tightening around the bouquet. "George, I'm sorry, there was- I- I lost my keys somewhere and then the flowers-"

"Stop," George interrupts, throat tight.

"I know, it was so stupid but I just-"

"You don't need to explain yourself. I don't want to hear it."

Dream ventures forward again, letting the door click shut behind him, plunging the room back into darkness. The moonlight coming through the window makes his form look ghostly.

George stands when he draws near, crossing to the opposite side of the coffee table in a last ditch attempt to put some distance between them.

Dream seems to take the hint, pausing where he stands, only a few feet away.

"George," Dream says, voice wavering.

It takes everything in George to not crumble. To not push past the wall he's built between them and tuck himself into Dream's arms like nothing is wrong.

But he can't. Not tonight.

"You didn't come." His voice sounds dull in the open air.

"I wanted to," Dream replies. "I tried."

"If you really wanted to be here you wouldn't have gone." George shivers. "You would have made it happen."

"I swear I tried George, but my keys-"

"I don't give a fuck about your keys," George spits.

Dream goes silent.

"And... and I know what you're thinking," George continues, pacing past him into the kitchen. "I'm overreacting."

"I don't think you're-"

"No. It's alright. I know I am. I'm tired and drunk and I just can't pretend anymore."

Dream looks like he wants to reach out. He doesn't.

"Listen, Dream," George takes a shuddering breath. "I get that we're very different people. We come from very different places and have different friends and different priorities; I *get* that." He pauses, leaning against the cool marble of the countertop. A desperate attempt to ground himself.

His lungs feel like they're shrinking.

"What I don't get is why you're doing this to me? The flowers and the late night conversations. Taking me home like I'm... Dream, do you realize how all this makes me feel? Do you even realize what you're doing?"

The paper surrounding the bouquet crinkles in his hand. The sound is deafening.

George clings to the countertop, watching Dream's Adam's apple bob, unable to look any higher. The alcohol from earlier is making his stomach turn. Making his tongue sharp and brain fuzzy.

"I don't know if this is some kind of game for you," he breathes. "Stringing me along, and whispering whatever sweet things will make me stupid and trusting."

"It's not a game," Dream says instantly, and he sounds so sorry George almost believes him.

George takes a shaky breath.

"You were supposed to kiss me."

It's gone too far now, but he can't stop.

"I was waiting for you to kiss me, Dream." His throat feels dry and scratchy, and he tries to swallow. It only hurts worse. "I waited and waited and waited."

It takes too long for Dream to respond.

"I'm sorry," He says finally, voice breaking.

It makes him scared.

"Kiss me, Dream," George says.

He takes a step forward and stumbles, but doesn't fall. Dream flinches, but doesn't move.

"Kiss me."

Dream stays still.

"I know you're sorry," George heaves, tears pricking his eyes. "I don't need your apologies."

Another step.

"I can't do that."

He stops. "What?"

Dream's lip is trembling. "I can't do that, George. Not right now."

A sense of exhaustion- all encompassing- washes over George all at once. Suddenly every limb is dragging him down. Underneath all of it is a sort of numbness. Because where there should be

tears, there is nothing.

“Then go.”

Dream closes his eyes, voice barely more than a whisper. “George. Please.”

George shakes his head slowly, backing up until Dream’s features become blurred.

“Go.”

Though he doesn’t really want him to... Dream leaves.

And George finally has his answer.

## Chapter End Notes

Come cry with me on [Twitter](#) :')

## Chapter 10

### Chapter Summary

If he speaks, he will shatter.

So he doesn't.

Still, unable to help himself, he nods, knowing Dream will understand the wordless reply.

I missed you too.

Maybe he understands the rest of it too, the I love you, and I'm sorry, and I need you.

### Chapter Notes

And we're back! Thank you all for your patience in getting this chapter out! To make up for it, this chapter is twice as long as normal ;) Sorry I am not able to reply to everyone's comments but know that I read every single one. You are all the sweetest people, and I'm so thankful for your continued support :) (we're almost at 100k hits!!) Only two chapters left till this story is finished!

As always, thank you to my betas, [Ro](#) and [Logan](#). You both are lifesavers :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George half expects Dream to come back.

To waltz back through the door insisting that George was wrong. That he loves him, and he'll stay—that all of this has just been a misunderstanding. A bad dream.

He waits five... ten minutes on the couch with a blanket tucked up to his chin and his eyes on the door.

Dream doesn't come back.

He expects him to call. Between practices and meals in the days that follow George leaves his phone volume all the way up, and sets Dream's calls to go through do not disturb. He pretends to ignore the way his heart skips a beat each time the screen lights up with a notification.

Days pass.

Dream doesn't call.

He isn't sure what he's expecting anymore.

After all, it was him that told the boy to leave. It was him that waved off Dream's apologies and

explanations, standing with feet planted and jaw set until he disappeared out the door.

That memory burns with regret, filling up George's mind and leaving a pit in his stomach on nights he can't sleep.

Still, he made the right decision.

He *had* to have made the right decision.

*Right?*

It was self preservation. Desperation. It was a sound knowledge from years of experience that if someone doesn't want you, it's not worth sticking around, waiting to get your heart broken. Strike first. Put up walls. Look for warning signs and defend until all threats have disappeared. George has spent his fair share of time waiting for love that isn't coming. Waiting for a love that only manages to fester and crack inside of you, until all that remains is a painful hollowness in your chest.

It's not worth it.

*He's* not worth it.

But then there's Dream in his head again. Always Dream. Dream with that damned sorrowful look on his face when George told him to go. Dream who looked like *he* was the one who had just gotten his heart broken.

It's haunting.

It makes him doubt.

George rolls over in bed and shivers under his blankets.

\*\*\*\*\*

Cheer brings an adequate enough distraction.

It's the busiest time of the year, with nationals only a month away, and Puffy works George hard enough to forget whatever worries are on his mind.

It's only six a.m. and the gym lights are blinding overhead, making the university students wince and turn their gaze away as they stretch out sore muscles.

George presses his palms flat against the shining wooden floor, yawning into his shoulder as he leans forward. The burn of the stretch is familiar, and he can feel the beginnings of warmth seep into his limbs.

Now if only he could just keep his eyes open.

George doesn't sleep much as of late, and it's starting to wear on him. The coffee keeps him awake, at least, but more often than not he finds himself fighting a mess of exhaustion and worry in his waking hours, dragging himself out of bed for morning practice with nothing more than a responsibility to his team and pure spite.

People ask, here and there, and he tells them it's insomnia. The excuse seems to work.

Here though, encased in the walls of the gym, doing what he does best, George finds some sort of

reprieve. He's tired, sure, but there's a sort of thrill that comes with cheerleading that never fails to set his nerves alight, an energy all its own zipping through his body and helping him power through, at least for a couple hours.

Here, it's fluidity, routine, trust. Control. Safety. Something constant when it feels like everything else is falling apart.

George drinks it in, and lets it warm him, shaking off the weight on his shoulders as he passes through the threshold of the gym day after day.

An hour later, he's smiling, and sweating, and the biggest thing on his mind is landing the next front handspring in time to make it back to the formation.

"Let's run it again." Puffy claps once, reaching blindly for the pen in her hair. "We've almost got it."

Someone groans lightly and Puffy pauses to laugh, shifting her weight to one hip. "Oh you thought we were done? That was nothing but a warm-up kiddos. Just something to get your blood pumping."

"It's pumping," Niki mutters next to George, and they both chuckle under their breath, chests heaving.

"Listen, we've got a couple weeks to turn ourselves into the sharpest, most well-practiced team in the country." Puffy glances around at the group, one eyebrow raised. "And I don't know about you, but I think we're hanging out around C-tier."

There's a collective ripple of nervous agreement, people shrugging and laughing to themselves. George smiles, nodding along with them.

Puffy places both hands on her hips once the noise has died down. "As usual, I don't care how we place. There are some crazy teams out there and sometimes you're just going to get beat."

*Alabama. Texas. Tennessee.*

All teams they've been bested by before. George has watched their competitions too many times to count. They're good—the best in the country, and he knows exactly how strong their teams can be.

"But I promise you there's nothing worse than getting out on that floor and giving an under-prepared or half-hearted performance."

*She's definitely got a point with that one.* George has been there too many times to count.

He has countless memories of early high school and college competitions, before he had found his footing with the team. Routines where he had been far more worried about if he looked stupid or if his parents were watching than what the next move was.

The sinking feeling after those nights was unforgettable, something he has vowed not to put himself through again.

"We're not gonna do that," Puffy continues. "We're gonna work past the sore muscles and the songs you're all sick of hearing, and bust our asses the second we get out there. And then we'll go home with our heads held high and I'll buy you all ice cream."



Another wave of chuckles from the team. George sees a few people high five or nudge each other at the prospect of free dessert.

“Alright. Well with that, Captain, why don’t you run this one while I go ask the secretary about those bus fees again,” Puffy says, nodding at George and starting a slow jog backwards. “If you see anyone slacking off, uh- make them sing a solo or something. I don’t know, you figure it out.”

George gives her a thumbs up as she disappears around the corner, then takes a few steps ahead of the formation. He turns to face the team with folded arms.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m not feeling particularly confident about my vocal performance today,” he begins, rocking back on his heels.

There are several wary smiles and nods of agreement.

“Hm. That’s what I thought.” George smiles back and moves towards the music setup. As the team finds their places, he turns towards them once more.

“You heard Puffy. Let’s all give this one-hundred and ten percent okay?”

He clicks play, watching the team- *his* team- take their positions, heads held high. Front and center, he joins them. The ripple of movement starts, perfectly timed with the music, and he can’t help but think it feels like home.

\*\*\*\*\*

*The stands are quiet at this time of night.*

There’s a distinct lack of stomping and shuffling from students and fans, leaving George’s footsteps to echo off the metal platforms. It’s cool, but not cold, a slight breeze whispering across his skin before departing.

It’s technically illegal to be here past school hours, but George has snuck in enough times with friends and teammates to know that security doesn’t check often. Besides, he won’t be here long.

Even in the dark, the stadium is familiar. The place is oddly comforting, if a little eerie, and George traverses it with an easy gait, padding softly across the turf, then the track. One step in front of the other.

The space below the student section looks strangely empty without the team there to fill it, bouncing off the energy of the crowd before them. Even now, he misses it.

Letting the cool railing guide him, George climbs the steps of the metal stands until he reaches the top level, right underneath the announcer’s box. There, finally, he sits, resting his head back against the old wood with a sigh.

He’s not entirely sure why he’s here.

The team has to be at an away-game tomorrow morning, and he really should be asleep right now to keep from passing out on the field. But too many hours spent tossing and turning in bed have made him restless.

By two a.m. he had been out the door with untied shoes on his feet, and Dream’s jacket on his back.

Now, George tucks the swathes of fabric tighter around his frame, letting the faint scent of familiar cologne and detergent on the material wash over him.

He isn't sure why he grabbed it over his other hoodies and windbreakers. It was a stupid decision really. After all, he's supposed to be mad at Dream... he *is* mad at Dream... but he also misses him fiercely. It's like a part of himself has been cut away, leaving a gaping hole in his chest. George feels the absence every time he does the dishes, thumbs through the recipes in his cookbook.

Ordinarily, he would call his mother, or maybe Jane, to ask for advice on what to do with himself. He would sit with the phone pressed close, knees tucked to his chest, rambling, and sometimes crying about where he had screwed up, or what someone had done to hurt him. They would listen, asking questions occasionally, and offer advice or consoling words. Even when it wasn't much help, George left the call breathing easier.

But the Vincents have kept their distance, finding no luck in reaching George in the period after the football game.

The only one who's called as of late has been Cameron, asking for help on how to fix his computer. The call had been a breath of fresh air, and though George couldn't bring himself to ask about the rest of the family, Cameron mentioned that they missed him anyway.

George sighs.

Maybe this is the wrong place to forget about his worries.

If he squints, he can see where his parents had sat only a few months ago, looks of surprise and frustration splayed across their faces as he finally snapped, shouting loud enough to garner looks passing families and fans. He can see where his father stood at the front entrance, phone still still cradled to his cheek. He can see the bathroom where he had fled, where Dream-

*Dream.*

The memory has faded now to nothing more than a dull pang. Still, it rings with bitterness, now. George blinks hard to make it subside.

Dream is in everything here. In the stands, on the field. The bathroom. The locker room. Everything about this place reminds George of him.

They've cried here. He remembers Dream's tears, silent at first before becoming louder, and more broken. He remembers the feel of them dropping against his neck as he held Dream on the porcelain tiles of the empty shower.

He remembers his own tears, remembers how they had slowly retreated as the warmth of the kind boy's gentle words filled him and brought him back down to earth.

Whether George likes it or not, they've tainted this place together.

It makes his heart ache.

The metal beneath his hands is cool, and George grips it, white knuckled. The chill of it seeps into his palms, anchoring him to the space around him.

He wants to talk to his parents. He wants to talk to Dream.

*"But they hurt you,"* a part of him insists stubbornly. *"Again and again and again, they betrayed*

*your trust. If they cared, they would have tried harder. They don't care, George. They don't care, so why do you?"*

He cares. His hands itch to reach for his phone because despite everything he still cares.

Maybe that makes him stupid. Gullible.

Or maybe that's just human nature.

Wilbur's words come unbidden, bouncing around his skull.

*"I learned that sometimes when you love someone, it makes you afraid."*

"I'm afraid," George barely whispers, burying his face in the collar of the hoodie. Something pricks at the corners of his eyes and he blinks hard. "I'm so fucking afraid, Wilbur."

He tips his head back, trying to breathe. The tears come anyways.

"I don't want to lose them," he mumbles, and a gasp catches raggedly in his chest. "I can't."

George wonders if Dream is afraid, wherever he is. Afraid of these rifts and tears they keep making. Maybe Dream couldn't sleep either, and is lying awake, an identical rolling pit of worry in his stomach.

That's what they do best after all, fall apart, then put each other back together again.

He wonders if his father was afraid when he yelled at him that day. When he didn't come home for Thanksgiving. When George didn't respond to the calls he'd make every Sunday afternoon.

George was afraid the day the calls stopped. Maybe his father was too.

He stays on the bleachers for a long time- until his eyes are dry and his breaths come slow again, barely audible over the sound of the cicadas.

He walks home then, and crawls into bed, boneless and exhausted.

Sleep takes him almost instantly, and he lets unconsciousness drag him away, this time without a fight.

Tonight, he doesn't dream.

\*\*\*\*\*

The last thing George expects to see as he approaches the team's bus the next day is a confused-looking Jane, holding a wriggling Dennis in one arm, with her other wrapped around the stomach of a light haired little girl, trying to make a break for it. She shifts her weight to the other foot squinting and looking around the parking lot.

They've just finished cheering at a basketball game an hour away from Northview, the whole team eager to lug their gear onto the bus and take a nap on the ride home.

Jane lives nearby, but George hadn't even told her he'd be in town, much less gotten any sort of head's up that she'd be loitering around the parking lot until he showed up. He makes a mental note to tease his sister about her stalking habits at the first opportunity.

Really, the surprise isn't unwelcome. It's been months since he's seen any of his siblings, and

there's a sort of comfort that washes over him at her appearance, coupled with the obvious confusion and slight anxiety that comes with his inability to read Jane's expression from this far away.

*Is she here to lecture him? To ask for a ride home?* If she's hoping he'll babysit the kids or something they might have a problem.

The four year old is actually the one that catches sight of him first, gesturing with one chubby fist and shouting "Gogy!" excitedly.

George grins and waves back from afar, catching Jane's attention, who looks up and smiles back awkwardly, finally setting her son down.

"Did you know she was gonna be here?" Karl asks, laughing lightly as Dennis shrieks happily and runs to meet George.

"No idea," George replies, shaking his head and tossing a glance back to where the rest of the team is trickling out of the building. "She must be up to no good."

Once he's scooped up his very enthusiastic nephew, he makes his way over to Jane, who waits with both hands on her hips. Dennis' twin, Nora pulls on her shirt incessantly.

"Hey stranger," she says, as soon as they draw near.

"Hey stalker," he replies with a smirk, raising his eyebrow curiously. "What in the world are you doing here?"

"I'm taking you for slushies. The kids wanted slushies."

George scoffs lightly. "What?"

Jane shrugs. "You heard me. Let's go kiddo."

Karl giggles from behind him and gives him a light shove. "You heard her. Go on, George."

As soon as he's at her side Jane starts walking towards the next row of parked cars, swinging her car keys on one finger.

George splutters, holding his ground even as Dennis starts to whine and reach for his mom.

"I've still- I should really let Puffy know that I'm-"

"Hey Karl, let your coach know that I'll drive this idiot home, okay?"

"What-?"

Karl gives them both a thumbs up. "Will do. See you tomorrow, George." When George doesn't move he rolls his eyes and makes an exaggerated waving motion. "I said see you. As in, go get slushies with your sister. Bye!"

He looks on pointedly until George finally sighs and follows after Jane, letting Dennis down to run ahead.

"If I get kidnapped, this is your fault," he calls back, widening his eyes and pointing at Karl.

Karl blows a kiss in return, going back to join the rest of the team, who are slowly collecting along

one side of the bus. “Have fun!”

George huffs, then looks down as he feels a (slightly sticky) hand grab his. He smiles to himself in disbelief and amusement, giving in and letting the curly haired little girl lead him towards the silver minivan.

“Alright Nora, what kind of slushy should we get?”

\*\*\*\*\*

The sun is just starting to set when Jane sits on the swing beside George, slushie in one hand. She keeps her gaze focused forward, where the twins are giggling and climbing around the playground, both of their mouths stained purple.

George watches too for a while, rocking the swing gently where his feet touch the ground.

They’re the only ones here, the last of the other families having packed up and headed home for dinner. It’s peaceful.

Jane looks at ease, which is rare for her, and George takes a moment to study her face. She’s not that old, only in her late twenties, yet she always seems so much more mature.

George feels a world apart from her. Though, he didn’t always.

In their early years, before Jane had moved out, she had doted on him constantly, getting him to play dress up and pretend when the other brothers wouldn’t. She was bossy, sure, but they made fast friends, and got along well for the most part. He remembers confiding in her about the kids at school who called him weird for playing with the girls at recess, and about the rumors that were spread years later because of it.

Being a well-adjusted, popular, smart upperclassman at the time, her advice wasn’t always helpful, but it was still nice to have someone to talk to.

As graduation, university, marriage, and children came and went, their conversations became sparse, quick and formal. Still caring, but distant.

Which brings to light the question of why the hell he’s sitting at her side in the first place, still with no explanation provided beyond an impromptu treat trip.

He kicks lightly at the woodchips, repeating the action until the dirt surface starts to peek through beneath.

When it becomes clear that Jane isn’t going to say anything, George clears his throat.

“How’s Dennis?” He finally asks, grabbing a hold of the cool metal chains on either side of the swing. “I never really... heard what ended up happening with...” he trails off, feeling for the first time, slightly guilty at the lack of interest in the phone call that had taken his father away from the game.

Jane doesn’t seem offended, only letting out a tired sigh and setting the melted remains of her slushie down in the dirt.

“They found a cyst, but it was small, and wasn’t cancerous or anything. They’re gonna keep an eye on it, but he’s been doing okay lately.” She runs a hand through her hair, tugging at the ends absentmindedly. “Still, scary stuff.”

George looks down, dragging his toe across the dirt. "I'm glad he's okay."

Jane nods. "Me too." She pushes the swing back a little, then glances over at him. "Dad told me what happened," she says softly, mouth turned into a slight frown. "He feels really bad about it."

George feels his stomach twist. It feels different this time, not the tight knot of white-hot anger he's familiar with. It's more of a sinking sensation, the kind that makes your mouth shut tight, and your heart feel heavy.

He doesn't say anything.

Jane lets the swing drift forward, slowing it with her feet. "He really did want to watch. It was my fault, really."

"It's not, Jane," he says quickly, shaking his head. "You needed someone and..."

"And he helped me, yes."

She hesitates, looking like she wants to reach out. Instead, she folds her hands in her lap.

"It meant a lot to have him there for me in that moment," she starts, quietly. "But I know it meant a lot to you for him to be there for you too. So for that, I'm sorry."

Jane does reach out now, placing one hand gently on his shoulder. She waits till he meets her eyes.

"Being a parent is hard sometimes. It's like trying to run a marathon with a broken leg. You can keep moving forward one step at a time, but you're going to stumble and fall a lot before you get to the finish line."

"A lot," he mumbles, but can't help the small smile that creeps through when Jane laughs, and pulls him towards her into a side hug, swing chains clinking.

"A lot," she agrees. "So many times."

George lays his head on her shoulder, watching as Nora makes it to the top of the slide and waves. He waves back.

"I don't expect you to forgive him right away, or to not be hurt," Jane says, rubbing his back in the same way he's seen her do to her kids when they're upset. "For this, or any of the other stuff."

*The other stuff.*

Cheer.

Teddy.

Skirts and boyfriends and friends that have been in more bars than churches.

All looked at with barely-swallowed disdain and disappointment.

Would his parents have looked at Dream like that?

He squeezes Jane's hand.

"I'll call Dad."

Her eyes brighten. "You will?"

George nods. "I will." He pauses. "Does he really feel bad?"

"Yes, awful," Jane answers, earnestly, without hesitation.

Funny enough, he believes her.

She lets go, letting George's swing fall back into place. "Are you good to head out? I should probably get back soon to help Steven with dinner and put the baby to bed."

"Sure."

Jane stands, waving the kids over from the playground. George stays sitting.

"I think parents should quit trying to run marathons like that," he says, tone light, but contemplative. "They really ought to fix the broken leg first."

"Hm?" Jane replies back over her shoulder, both hands extended forward, waiting until Dennis and Nora have a hold on either side of her.

George shakes his head and smiles softly, walking up to them, then leaning over to kiss both of the twins on the top of the head.

"Nevermind."

Jane looks at him curiously and he shrugs.

"Someone's gotta play field nurse I guess," he says as a way of explanation, knowing full well he's only confusing his sister further. He doesn't feel like elaborating.

Before she can ask again, he starts walking towards the car, hands behind his back. His phone feels heavy in his pocket.

*I'll fix it.*

He swallows, thinking of the call he'll be making tonight.

*Someone has to.*

He'll fix it, because he's tired of people getting hurt. Because maybe that's the first step to healing.

\*\*\*\*\*

It's been eight days since New Years.

*Not that he's counting.*

*(... he's definitely counting).*

That's eight days of trying to convince himself that this is for the best, that he's moving on, that Dream doesn't love him and will never love him because why else would he *leave* ?

It's his own fault, he knows, because when someone says "*get out*" you're *supposed* to leave. You're not supposed to gather them close to your chest and whisper "*I'll stay, I'll stay, I'll stay,*" until they change their mind, but a part of him still wishes Dream did.

Damn. He didn't expect it to hurt this much.

It's been eight days and the distractions are running out. Every night George finds himself on the verge of calling Dream just to hear his voice again.

Would he pick up? Would he ridicule George for calling? Maybe he'd apologize, and then George would apologize, and then they could go back to watching movies together on the couch or going for drives when one of them can't sleep. Maybe Dream would agree to forget about New Years, moving forward like George hadn't asked to kiss him. Maybe they could be friends. *Just* friends.

That would be enough, he thinks. Surely it would be better than this- the silence, the distance.

It's settled then. He'll call Dream.

He'll explain how all of this has been a big misunderstanding- that he was drunk and saying things he didn't mean. Dream will laugh, and breathe a sigh of relief because "*for one second I was getting the wrong idea,*" and George will say "*no, of course not,*" and smile into the receiver. It won't reach his eyes, but through the phone, Dream won't see it. Dream won't know. He'll never have to know.

The phone is smooth in George's hands, trembling only slightly.

He opens up his contacts ignoring the glowing (7) next to Dream's name. Seven missed calls.

George breathes deeply, swiping out of the recent calls screen and opening up Dream's contact information. His finger hovers over the call button.

*He can do this.*

*He can do this.*

The screen changes with a flash to show an incoming call.

"Shit," George jumps, dropping the phone in surprise as Karl's ringtone blasts through the speakers on full volume. "You've got to be kidding me."

He picks the phone up and answers the call, dragging a hand down his face.

"You scared the hell out of me, thanks a lot."

On the other line, Karl laughs lightly. "Why is that my fault? Were you sleeping or something?"

George purses his lips, looking away. "Or something. Don't worry about it though."

"Whatever you say. Just put it on silent mode next time."

He huffs. "Karl, why are you even calling?"

"There's a thing."

"A thing."

"Okay a party. Well not really a party. It's just an end of the season celebration for the football team, since their last game is this week."

George's mind skims through the last few parties he's attended, all of them ending in complete and



utter shit, in the form of booze spilled down his front, a splitting headache, or tears clouding his vision, making him stumble as he tries to escape the hellscape disguised as a social outing.

“What does this have to do with me?” He drawls back, not giving an inch.

Karl continues. “Well, Sapnap is going.”

“Good for him.”

“George-” Karl cuts in, tone pleading.

George shakes his head, laying back on the couch. “I thought Sapnap said these football things are a waste of time. Something about a bunch of egomaniacs-”

“He’s really looking forward to this. It’s the old team captain that’s hosting it- you know the guy that Dream replaced as quarterback?” Karl fumbles for a moment, waiting nervously for a reaction from George, then recovers when there is none. “Anyways, yeah. Sapnap really looks up to the guy, and is excited to see him again before he and his wife move. It’s not supposed to be anything crazy. Just the team and a plus one for each of them.”

*A plus one.*

George’s math skills may be sub-par but this doesn’t add up.

“Karl.” He sighs.

“Yeah?”

“Sapnap is bringing you, I assume.”

The other side of the line goes quiet for a moment. “... Yes?”

“That’s a plus one.” He waits, running a hand through his hair. “How do I fit into this?”

Another silence, this one far longer. Though he’d like to ignore it, George can tell where this is going.

Karl hums. “Well... we were thinking...”

*Yup.*

He resists the urge to groan. “No. *No* . That doesn’t even-”

“Just talk to him at least. You don’t have to make it a big thing. Just apologize for rejecting him or whatever and then-”

“ *I* didn’t reject *him* , Karl. He-”

Karl sucks in air through his teeth. “Okay, okay, chill, I know. Don’t you think it might have come off that way though?”

Restlessness courses through George’s body and he stands, cradling the phone to his cheek.

“What do you mean?”

“I *mean* I don’t blame the guy for staying away for a couple days. You didn’t exactly let him down easy.”

*"It wasn't a couple days."* He nearly corrects. *"It was eight days, seventeen hours and-"*

"Listen, George." Karl breaks through his train of thought with a heavy sigh. "I'm your best friend, you hear? In the end I'm always going to be in your corner. And I know you're hurting right now. It sucks, I feel for you."

George worries his lip between his teeth mumbling a lighthearted reply.

*"It really sucks."*

"Yeah." He can hear the tinges of a sad smile in Karl's voice at the comment. "I know, buddy."

"But..." George prompts, pacing slow circles around the room.

"But... I think Dream is probably feeling just as lousy as you are. If not worse. He cares for you too, you know? Whether that's as a friend, or something else."

"Mm," George replies quietly, pulling his hoodie up and tucking his face into it. The fabric is soft, encasing his ears and the bottom part of his face in warmth. For a moment, George focuses on the soft rise and fall of his own chest.

*In... and out. In... and out.*

Karl shifts, likely rolling over in his bed as the call goes muffled for a few seconds..

"George."

*In... and out.*

He doesn't respond. Still, Karl knows he's listening.

"You love him. I know you do. And in some roundabout way he loves you too." He clicks his tongue, tone going from soft, to teasing. "I refuse to believe you both came all this way just to go back to pretending you hate each other- which you don't- by the way."

George smiles softly to himself.

"Anyways, all I'm saying is give Dream a shot before you go thinking you're both doomed to an eternal silent treatment or whatever. Whatever it is you're worried about, he'll understand."

*He'll understand.*

*"That's just the problem,"* he thinks. *"He understands me too well. He's going to know."*

*"Let him know,"* another part of him says. *"Let him see through all of it and finally be free. Finally let go."*

George doesn't voice those thoughts aloud. Instead he tilts his head against the phone as if it's Karl himself, standing right in front of him with comforting arms on both shoulders.

"Alright," he says. "I'll talk to him. You're right."

Karl seems relieved. "Good. I'm always right," he replies through a yawn.

"Except for when you're wrong."

“God, can you quit being stubborn and get some sleep please?”

“You’re the one that-”

Karl makes another exaggerated yawning noise. “ *Goodnight* , George.”

George chuckles and wrinkles his nose. “Fine. Goodnight, idiot.”

The other line goes quiet and George flops back down onto the couch, rolling onto his back.

*Tomorrow.*

Even if it makes his legs shake so hard he can barely stand, or if he feels so sick to his stomach he might hurl on Dream’s shoes, he’s going to do it. He’s going to talk to him.

The very thought makes his heart race and head pound.

“C’mon George, get a grip,” he mutters, pulling the hood of his hoodie over his head and tightening the strings as far as they can go, until he’s cocooned inside with just his eyes peeking through, staring at the popcorn ceiling above.

*Tomorrow.*

\*\*\*\*\*

George’s leg bounces incessantly as he knocks on the door of Dream’s apartment for the third time.

Just as he had predicted the day previous, he’s a nervous wreck, barely maintaining his composure enough to leave the house and trek his way up two flights to the familiar room number.

He’s not wearing a hoodie this time, opting for a crisp looking sweater and slacks, hair combed for the first time in days.

“*It’s because I’m going home for dinner after this,*” he had explained defensively to Callahan, who was immediately suspicious of why he looked so nice.

Callahan hadn’t bought it.

George can’t blame him. Even he can’t deny that his family hadn’t crossed his mind once when getting dressed for the evening.

Dream, however, had.

... Many, *many* times.

George glances up at his hand, still hovering in a fist in front of the door, and seeing the way shakes, immediately shoves it in his pocket.

“Please be home,” he mumbles, tucking a loose strand of hair behind his ear and checking the time. Dream should be home from practice by now.

However, despite his pleading, the door remains painfully quiet, not budging.

*Damn.*

This has got to be more painful than not coming in the first place.

If he had given up earlier, he wouldn't have had to deal with this knot in his stomach, growing more painful by the second. At least then he could have slept an extra hour or two, forgetting his problems for a short period of unconscious bliss.

*Oh well. There's always tomorrow.*

*( If he can manage to work up the courage to face a potential heart attack twice- which at this point feels highly unlikely.)*

George sighs, stepping away from the door in defeat. He adjusts his backpack, trying to swallow his disappointment as he turns to leave.

“George?”

The voice stops him in his tracks, eyes shooting up in alarm to meet painfully familiar green irises.

Forget *potential* heart attack.

There's a clatter of cans and cereal boxes as Dream drops one of his grocery bags, swiping for it in mid-air and missing.

George chokes on air, frozen in place.

“Shit,” Dream mutters, tearing his gaze away as he bends down to pick up the scattered items.

It takes George a few seconds of stunned blinking before he drops to his knees as well, wordlessly handing Dream a partially smashed loaf of bread.

He takes it gratefully, hair hanging in front of his eyes, obscuring them. George wants to swipe it away so he can look at him directly- have some chance at reading his mind like they've always managed to do.

He resists though, pulling his hand away as soon as all the groceries are all accounted for, back in the plastic sack. Dream helps him to his feet, and George tries not to throw up on his shoes out of nervousness the second warm skin touches his.

Dream looks equally anxious, shifting on his feet a few feet away from George.

His Adam's apple bobs. George watches that instead of his face.

“George,” Dream repeats, like his name is the only thing he can muster up. “You're here.”

“Yeah,” George replies sheepishly, looking down. There's a grass stain on his white sneakers. He rubs at it with one foot. “Yeah I'm- yeah.”

Dream looks at him as if he's a ghost and George swallows.

“Hi,” he adds quietly, hoping to soften the awkwardness.

Dream fumbles, mouth opening and closing for a moment, before he blinks a few times, raising the hand still holding the grocery bag.

“Hi,” he says.

Silence fills the space as they take each other in, both waiting for the other to speak. As usual, Dream caves first.

“It’s good to see you,” he breathes, the hint of a nervous smile catching on the corner of his lips.

“You too,” George says, a little more choked. He tries to smile back, but finds he isn’t able to.

“Um I- you’re probably wondering why I’m here,” he says, waiting for the second or two it takes for Dream to nod in confirmation.

“Right- I- yeah, I guess so.”

He looks nervous. So, so nervous. But there’s relief there too, in the way he scans George’s face intently, like he’s memorizing it.

George thinks he might miss Dream *more* with him standing right here, close enough to touch. Rediscovering fidgeting hands and messy blonde hair and a strawberry-toned blush in real time, with the real thing, is far more painful than any imaginary conversations he’s had over the past week and a half. More than anything, it just reminds George how utterly *fucked* he is.

He clears his throat, willing air to pass through his lungs properly again.

“The end of the season party. I want to go.”

Dream seems a little surprised, one eyebrow dancing upward subtly.

“Or- okay, *Karl* wants me to go,” he explains hurriedly, trying not to fumble over his words. “And Sapnap.”

Saying it aloud, George realizes how completely ridiculous this sounds. Who is he to just waltz up to Dream’s apartment unannounced and ask to be his plus one to a party he wasn’t invited to?

*Karl and Sapnap want me to go? Really?*

He curses himself silently, realization dawning that Karl and Sapnap probably don’t care one bit if he goes to this party. This has all just been a scam to get him to talk to-

*Dream.*

Dream is looking at him with what might be amusement, or maybe pity. Whatever it is, he’s not schooling his expression well enough for George to not overthink the way his mouth twitches.

“You want to go... with me?” Dream asks, and while George expects cockiness, he instead finds Dream’s tone soft and genuine, still hesitant with confusion.

George gulps.

“I- yeah. If that would be alright with you.”

Dream takes a moment to process the request, and George can see the wheels turning rapidly in his head, trying to solve the puzzle before him. Reaching some sort of roadblock, his brows knit together, and his demeanor changes to something of discomfort and uncertainty.

George picks up on it right away, interjecting breathlessly before Dream can open his mouth to speak.

"I know that there's probably a lot you want to say, and a lot we should... talk about," he says, wincing slightly and looking away. "And I know that this all seems out of nowhere."

Dream watches, not saying anything. It makes George nervous.

"A-and you're probably thinking that I have a lot of nerve showing up here after what happened on New Years," he plunges ahead. "You probably think this is weird and want to go with someone else-"

"I want to go with you, George."

*That shuts him up.*

Dream sets his grocery bags down, arms hovering awkwardly at his sides. "I- I'm glad you're here, and I'm really glad we're talking, even if it's just about this but-"

"We can talk about the other stuff after the party, I promise." George bites the inside of his cheek until he can almost taste blood. "Any of it. I was just..." He sighs, feeling Dream's eyes on him. "I was just hoping we could wait 'til afterwards? Enjoy ourselves and celebrate for the night, before-before anything else. Ya know?"

Dream seems to be debating with himself for a long moment, body tense and still.

"You promise we will though? Talk, I mean," he finally says, shoving his hands in his pockets.

George nods, despite the sinking feeling in his gut.

"Yes, Dream. I promise."

Dream blows out a breath of air, and the tension goes with it, settling back into something warmer, softer.

"Ok. Good." He smiles. "In that case, I don't see why not."

George meets his eyes, and Dream gives him a look of reassurance. "I think you're right. We could both use a night out. It'll be fun."

"Mhm," George smiles back numbly. "Of course I'm right."

Dream chuckles lightly at the attempt of a joke, rocking back on his heels. George watches as he grabs his bags and crosses to the door, hovering with his hand on the knob.

"Hey, uh-" his grip tightens. "Sap and I are having a movie night tonight. Would you want to..." he trails off, gaze flickering up to George then away again.

George's throat goes dry just as his stomach flips.

"I don't know if that's... I probably shouldn't," he replies, voice small.

Dream's shoulders tighten, and his face falls ever so slightly. He exhales in a half-laugh, demeanor tinged with awkwardness. "Right. Yeah, you're right- sorry."

It makes George's chest tighten, and for a second he feels like he might cry if he stays any longer, trapped looking at Dream's dejected expression.

"I- I have to head home soon. Or I would," he adds as a desperate afterthought, but Dream is closed

off to him.

“It’s okay, George,” he says, turning the knob with a gentle shrug. “See you at the party?” Dream smiles, and it might be convincing if George couldn’t read the disappointment behind it in a second.

George returns the smile. It doesn’t reach his eyes. “Yeah. See you.”

He turns without another thought, making it the whole way down the hallway before Dream’s distant voice makes him stop in his tracks.

“I missed you,” he says almost imperceptibly, as if secretly hoping George won’t hear it.

George trembles where he stands, elevated in a moment of time.

Three words and he’s on the edge of a cliff, teetering over the edge. Three words and his resolve is crumbling beneath him, knees weak and heart pounding.

George wills himself not to break.

When he turns over one shoulder- takes in Dream still standing there hovering with a hand on the open doorway, his lip trembles despite himself.

If he speaks, he will shatter.

So he doesn’t.

Still, unable to help himself, he nods, knowing Dream will understand the wordless reply.

*I missed you too.*

Maybe he understands the rest of it too, the *I love you*, and *I’m sorry* , and *I need you*.

Maybe Dream can see the way he’s cracking at the edges, one misstep away from falling to pieces.

George doesn’t stay long enough to find out.

\*\*\*\*\*

Dream is set to play as quarterback in the final game of the football season. George sees him as he enters the arena an hour before the game, duffel bag slung over his shoulder.

He can’t help but feel his stomach dip in nervousness as he disappears into the dressing room. Despite everything else, he desperately wants him to do well- knows how much this means to him.

He’s the last to join the team for pre-game stretches, a vision of confidence and self-assurance as he jogs onto the field.

George knows it’s a facade, knows how he probably spent the last twenty minutes in the dressing room trying not to panic, running through the plays he’s memorized a hundred times over. The thought makes his heart swell with protectiveness, and when Dream catches his eye across the field he can’t help but signal with a thumbs up, mouthing a quick “*Good luck.*”

Dream brightens considerably at that, smiling gratefully and returning the gesture before he joins the circle of football players.

A worried freshman cheerleader approaches George from behind, mumbling something about a lost pompom. He reluctantly tears his gaze away, placing a comforting hand on the girl's shoulder and agreeing to help her look.

The stands fill quickly, the noise level rising from scattered conversations to a dull roar as the start time of the game grows closer, anticipating climbing.

George dances from one foot to the other, warding off the gentle chill that creeps over his skin. Puffy glances at her watch, then gives a nod to George, indicating it's time for the cheer squad to take their places.

The underclassmen finish their routine flawlessly, earning calls of approval from the crowd, then funnel off the track. George and the other older team members pat backs and give high fives as they pass, now moving forward to spread out on the track.

For perhaps the first time, he almost wishes they could skip the opening routine, anxiety growing as they wait for the football game to start.

He leads the chants with practiced ease, falling back into muscle memory as he watches the field.

*V-I-C-T-O-R-Y*

*That's Northview's battle cry!*

*Victory, Victory, Victory!*

*Victory, Victory, Victory!*

A buzzer blares and the band starts a drumroll, capturing the crowd's attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is two o'clock!" The announcer calls through a crackling loudspeaker. "This marks the start of our final playoff game of the season here at Northview! The stakes are high for our players as they take on their rivals joining us from the University of Oklahoma. The winner of this match will be claiming a top three spot in the NCAA championship, an achievement Oklahoma has captured for the past three years."

The guest section across the turf, painted with figures adorned in deep red clothing, cheer, clapping and stomping distantly.

The speaker crackles again, carrying over the wave of fans.

"But enough introduction, now for the moment you've all been waiting for... welcome to the field-the Northview University football team!"

In a crescendo of sound, a flash of green appears before them. George watches intently, heart pounding as the Northview players break through the silver banner stretched across one corner of the field in a cluster of helmets and jerseys. George picks out Dream almost immediately, leading the group with Sapnap a few steps behind him.

The crowd whistles and hollers, surrounding George with a cacophony of voices as he trains his eyes on the bright white "22" crossing the turf.

He can't see Dream's expression under the helmet, but there's a lightness in his step that wasn't there in his first game as quarterback. His gait is confident, quick-paced as though the energy of the stadium carries him forward on a sort of wave. He's in his element on this field, each step ringing



with excitement and anticipation. George smiles despite himself, feeling a rush of pride warm him from head to toe.

The thought crosses his mind before he can think twice.

That's *his boy* .

Any other day, George might have flinched away at the silent declaration, retreating into himself until he drowns in some mix of doubt and shame from the vulnerability that has escaped the cracks.

Not today though.

Not when his voice is swept up in the roar of the crowd, the air sharp with elation and spirit. Not when Dream turns his head towards George ever-so slightly before the team takes their places, so subtle that anyone else would have missed it.

George doesn't miss it. He memorizes it, tucking the moment close to his chest.

Because even after everything, they are still here, standing on this football field being drawn together like magnets. Always finding each other in a sea of faces.

It's insane. It's comforting.

And maybe they'll never be anything more than friends- thrown together with a mix of luck and persistence- but all of this will still always be *theirs*.

In some way, Dream *will* always be *his* .

And really, what more could he ask for?

\*\*\*\*\*

Northview doesn't win the football game.

It's close, with the scores climbing up into the thirties, but Oklahoma pulls ahead in the fourth quarter, snagging the victory.

Dream doesn't seem to mind though, shaking hands with the other quarterback with a blazing grin, still covered in grass stains and sweat. They exchange a few words and Dream laughs, nodding once before leaving to reunite with Sapnap, who's currently being swarmed by fans and teammates congratulating him on the miraculous interception he made at the start of the fourth quarter.

It was easily the play of the game, bringing the entire audience and team to their feet wildly as Sapnap ran towards their goal like his life depended on it, making it fifteen yards before he was brought down by the opposing team. George is pretty sure Karl nearly passed out beside him out of excitement, cheering his boyfriend on until his voice was hoarse.

Now, Karl is at Sapnap's side- watching him recall the play animatedly. Sapnap gestures with one hand while the other stays tangled in Karl's.

It's not long until Dream joins them, rushing Sapnap from behind and picking him up. The observing crowd laughs and Dream swings his friend around a few times before dropping him and ruffling his hair. Sapnap pretends to look annoyed, but can't stop the smile that immediately breaks through.

George chuckles under his breath, grabbing the last of his things and shoving them into his bag.

What he really wants is to join the throng of people, let himself be jostled into the circle where his friends reside and laugh along with them as Sapnap does another reenactment. But there's still the party tonight. More people, more noise and conversation. Already, the thought makes nervousness course through his veins. Plus if he leaves now, there will be time for a shower and some actual food beyond pizza before he has to get ready.

George makes a mental note to catch up with Sapnap later, shouldering his duffel and trailing away from the rowdiness of the field.

His phone rings before he can make it very far.

"What did Karl forget this time," he mutters, sifting through his bag to see if his friend had dropped a spare pair of shoes or his car keys inside. Everything seems to be in order.

George hums, reaches for the phone instead, then promptly looks back at the field as he answers it.

"Hello?"

"*Are you okay? Where are you going?*" Dream's voice comes through hurriedly, partially drowned out with the still-present background noise.

It takes him a second, but he manages to spot Dream standing a couple strides away from the group, with his phone to his ear. He's facing George, looking straight at him.

George lets out an amused half-laugh, offering a small wave. Dream waves back, and seems to relax a bit at the gesture. Still, he waits expectantly for an answer.

"Just a little tired, nothing to worry about. I'm going to try and beat the rush out of here," he assures, feeling fondness creep into his words. "Congrats on a good game though. You played great."

Dream rubs at his neck.

"*Thank you, that's- thank you,*" he replies, shuffling his feet. "*That means a lot.*"

"Anytime," George says softly, cradling the phone closer. He waits for Dream to continue.

He doesn't, simply looking at him from across the field with an odd look on his face. George coughs.

"Er... was that it then?" He speaks up awkwardly, wincing as his voice fills the space.

Dream seems to shake himself out of it, dipping his head in a nod. "*Yeah. That's... that's it.*"

George pauses for a moment, waiting with his finger hovering over the end call button. Dream doesn't make a move to hang up, but stays silent.

"Alright then-"

"*I'll pick you up at seven.*"

George blinks. He looks at Dream in the distance, both hands clutching the phone now. "Dream, I can just meet you there, it's no problem-"

*“Seven o’ clock. Be ready.”*

Without another word, he hangs up. If George squints, he can see the hint of a grin on the blond’s face before he turns away.

He scoffs, feeling his face warm just slightly.

“So be it then,” George hums to himself as he rattles his keychain absentmindedly, crossing towards the parking lot. “Seven o’ clock.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The sight of Dream’s truck parked in front of George’s apartment rings with a sort of *deja vu* that sends goosebumps prickling up his spine. It’s not a negative sensation, but it isn’t quite comfortable either. He wonders if Dream notices the way his steps falter for a second.

But Dream is all smiles as he greets George, leaning over to unlock his door.

“Hi. You look nice,” he says, leaving George to glance down at his outfit as the engine rumbles to life. It’s nothing exciting, a plain T-shirt and pants with a jean jacket wrapped around his frame. George wrinkles his nose slightly, subtly eying Dream next to him, who looks far more put together.

And handsome. Of course he looks handsome.

The long sleeved top is a deep green, soft and oversized, with a white collared shirt sticking out of the neckline. His hair is tamed for once, and the white shoes he’s wearing look expensive.

George forces himself to tear his gaze away.

A *“you too,”* sits heavy on his tongue, but he opts for a tight lipped smile and a whispered *“thanks,”* instead.

They make small talk for most of the drive. It’s so unnerving, talking to Dream like they’re strangers, that he partially wants to break the pleasantries and bring up New Years. Watch his knuckles go white against the steering wheel and let their voices carry louder and louder until it all explodes. He doesn’t though, holding his tongue and giving quick, shallow responses when the silence gets too loud, forcing Dream to start asking questions.

It’s better that way. Right?

As they pull up, George notes that the house where the party is being held looks surprisingly peaceful and put together. Nobody is passed out on the lawn (yet), and there’s a distinct lack of flashing neon lights coming from the windows. For a university party being thrown by a football alumni, it seems to be rather calm. Maybe this won’t be so bad after all.

There’s a haphazardly put up paper banner slung across the front entryway, with a painted green and silver *“Go Team!”* in the center, and a football on either side. It’s sort of endearing, and George can’t help but smile a little as Dream points it out.

“He was a good captain,” Dream mentions as he puts the car in park. “Great quarterback too. I’ve got big shoes to fill next season.”

“You’ll be great,” George says earnestly, hand falling on Dream’s shoulder before he can think better of it. He removes it quickly, pulling it back to his chest, but Dream’s gaze lingers on the

place where he touched him.

“Thank you,” he replies gently, eyes warm.

“Anytime,” George breathes, suddenly feeling antsy in his seat.

Dream is still looking at him.

He clears his throat, hand already reaching for the car door.

“Shall we?”

\*\*\*\*\*

George really, *really* wants a drink.

As terrible as the alcohol is at most college parties, there’s at least enough of it dispersed between shitty beer cans and odd-tasting punch that he can get tipsy enough to block out the slew of idiots making out on couches or having shouted conversations over the music.

Apparently though, Captain what’s-his-face didn’t get the memo. Because all that’s laid out on the tables is a few bottles of soda, mostly empty pizza boxes and an assortment of different kinds of Oreos.

*I guess becoming a dad makes you a little more conscientious about supplying a group of rowdy college kids in your house with booze*, George had thought to himself as he and Dream passed the pictures of a baby girl and a red-haired woman hung up along the wall beside the staircase.

It makes sense, he supposes, but they’ve been here a little under three hours and he’s starting to get edgy.

Partly due to the fact that that one greasy asshole who cornered George after practice months ago is here, along with his sidekicks, hovering around dark corners like some sort of boogeyman. He’s done a good job avoiding them so far, but a wary part of his brain is actively making sure to not stand too close to Dream when they’re in view.

Almost worse than that, though, is that it’s like George is the only one here who doesn’t know everybody else. Dream is up every other minute to greet a new person, clapping people on shoulders and discussing his college plans. It shouldn’t bother him, but as George sips at some room-temperature coke, tucked into a couch in the corner of the basement, he can’t help but feel out of place.

Karl and Sapnap had eased the loneliness for a while, finding a deck of cards in the closet and starting up a game of *Go Fish*. Soon, though, Karl was falling asleep on Sapnap’s shoulder between rounds leading them to send their goodbyes and retire for the night.

Dream is gone too, having disappeared upstairs ten minutes ago to “catch up with someone real quick.”

There’s been a lot of that over the past few hours.

George frowns, and focuses on shuffling the deck of cards in his lap.

A pair of red heels enter his vision.

“George, right?”

He glances up.

A tall girl with long blonde hair crosses the room, wincing with each step. The cause seems to be the stilettos. Her shoes perfectly match her lipstick, both a tad too bright for George's taste. He doesn't reply, eyeing her in confusion.

"Can I sit here?" She asks.

There's enough space on the couch for both of them since he's already shoved into one corner, so George shifts and utters a hesitant "yeah, go ahead."

The girl breathes a sigh of relief, collapsing onto the other cushion and quickly yanking her heels off.

"Don't even know why I wore these, hurts like a bitch," she mutters, tossing them aside and taking a drink of whatever's in her red solo cup, then speaks into it uninterestedly. "I'm Piper by the way. Steven's girlfriend."

"Ah," George nods, like he knows who that is. He glances at the stairwell to the upstairs, hoping for Dream to manifest at the bottom.

"Are you waiting for Dream?"

He blinks, tensing slightly. "No."

She shrugs, then takes another sip. "Hm."

"Yeah."

The silence stretches on. Piper pulls out her phone, scrolling through her social media feed.

George wishes to disappear into the couch cushions.

He knows should drop it. He should continue to ignore her till she gets bored enough to wander off and bother someone else. But it's beginning to feel like if George doesn't say something he'll simply dissolve into the air, burned into cinders.

So he clears his throat.

"How do you..." He trails off, but Piper picks it up, eyes still lazily on her phone.

"Know Dream?" She offers.

"Mhm."

"Steven brought him up a few times talking about football stuff, I guess. But he officially introduced me to him at some party on New Years." She scoffs, glancing around the room briefly. "Hell of a lot better than this one."

George's stomach sinks. "Oh."

"Yup," she says, popping the 'p' at the end.

George's mind races in circles, stuck on the phrase he'd rather forget.

*New Years. New Years, New Years, New Years.*

Piper sets the phone down temporarily, finally taking the time to look at George. Her eyebrow furrows.

“Wait so, are you and Dream here together then?”

His mind goes blank, fuzzy with flowers on his kitchen floor and a shimmering ball falling to earth on a hazy TV screen.

A nod.

“Like... together together?”

George’s chest feels too tight. “I don’t know,” he mumbles.

“‘Cause I could have sworn he said you two were just friends.”

George’s focus snaps shakily back into place.

Piper is looking at him with her head tilted to one side, blonde curls tipping over one shoulder. There’s no malice in her expression, only confusion.

George swallows. “He what?”

Piper frowns slightly. “Sorry I just thought-”

“What did he say?”

She pauses, then blows out a puff of air, eyes squinting up at the ceiling.

“Okay, well, I was pretty drunk so I don’t remember super well,” she begins, words trailing out painfully slowly. “But Steven and a couple other guys were asking about you two. Cause you’re always hanging around each other and stuff, I guess.”

Piper hesitates, glancing at George.

“And he uh- he said it wasn’t anything. That he wasn’t...”

“Gay,” George finishes.

A pause.

“... Yeah.”

*Okay.*

Despite the sound trickling through from upstairs, the air in the room goes deathly still. Piper sniffs, pursing her lips awkwardly, letting her acrylics go back to tapping at a glowing screen, each *click click click* somehow deafening.

George stays frozen in place.

There’s no alcohol in his system, but when he stands the room seems to spin.

“Where are you going?”

His tongue feels too thick to answer, so he stays silent, feet falling in front of each other until he reaches the stairs, climbing them one by one.

The overhead light up here is brighter than in the basement, and he flinches away from it as soon as he comes up for air. The only problem is *no air* up here either, there can't be because he *can't fucking breathe* as he pushes through cheerful partygoers.

Outside. He needs to get outside.

There's a distant voice behind him but it doesn't matter, none of it will matter until he can drink in the moonlight and fill his lungs again.

George bursts through the door with a kind of desperate urgency, stumbling out onto a well lit porch. The banner has fallen on one side, fluttering limply in the breeze. The first thought that crosses his mind is that that banner looks a little like he feels. The second is that it might be raining.

There's droplets hitting his cheeks, and it might be tears if not for the way they soak through his shirt almost immediately, making his jean jacket heavy and stiff. He struggles against it, trying and failing to shuck it off.

Someone is saying his name.

George starts walking.

Slow at first, then faster and faster, until his feet are pounding into the dark concrete, glinting slightly in the streetlight.

*Faster. Faster. Faster.*

If he runs faster he doesn't have to think. Doesn't have to feel.

*Faster.*

*"It wasn't anything."*

*Faster.*

*"He's not-"*

*Faster.*

His chest feels like it's going to tear open, throat raw and ragged. George thinks he tastes blood.

*Stupid.* That's what all this is. *Stupid, worthless, pointless.*

He trips.

There's a flash of pain in his knees and palms, dashed against the ground as he tries and fails to catch himself. He cries out, falling into a wet, tangled heap.

Nothing's broken, he can tell that much immediately, but it's suddenly as if every inch of his body is weighted down with sand, dragging him *down, down, down* to earth.

George rests his head against the sidewalk, trembling.

And then... he's flooded in light.

The rumble of that damned engine is so familiar he doesn't even need to look up to know what it

is.

He curls further into himself.

A car door slams.

“George what the *hell*,” Dream’s voice cuts through the storm, laced with concern as he jogs over. “Are you okay?”

George wants desperately to run, all of his muscles tense with it, but it’s a task enough to just lift his head and stare at spotless white expensive shoes.

Dream drops to his knees almost immediately, searching for injuries. The first touch across George’s back makes him recoil.

Dream’s voice rises in panic. “George, are you *okay* ? Fucking say something.”

A sob makes its way through first, choking him momentarily in the process. He pushes the words through anyways in a sharp gasp.

“Don’t *touch* me!”

He feels it innately as the warmth of Dream’s palms flinch away, retracting as if he’s been burned.

Dream is quiet after that.

He wants to ask him to turn the headlights off- the glass domes leaving them both far too exposed in the wash of white.

The air feels too fragile to speak though, so George bites his tongue.

Dream, apparently, doesn’t fucking get it, because he breaks the silence.

“Let me drive you home,” he says, and he sounds so scared George almost feels bad for him.

Almost. He doesn’t budge.

“George.”

They’re both soaked to the bone by now. He wonders if they’ll drown if they stay here long enough.

“ *George.* ”

George squeezes his eyes shut.

“I’m not getting in your truck.”

“Then let me walk you home. Hell, let me *carry* you home, just-”

“Dream.”

“George you’ve got to at least let me-”

“ *Dream.* ”

“I know you might be mad at me but will you please-”



"I said *don't touch me.*"

Dream pounds his fist into the concrete.

"I'm not fucking leaving you, okay?!"

George shudders.

That probably hurt. He knows it hurt.

It will scuff his fingers the same way George's are. It will ache for a few days when he holds a pencil.

Salt mixes with rainwater and runs into the cracks of the sidewalk.

Dream's irregular breaths take time to slow and even out. George breathes with him.

"I'm not- I don't know what's wrong," he stutters out, "I don't know if this is my fault or... or if it's something else, *I don't know*, George, but just let me do this. Whatever else there is... just *let me do this*."

It surprises them both when George does.

Maybe it's out of exhaustion, or some screwed sense of guilt, or maybe just because it's Dream, but after a few moments, George rises to his feet and ambles over to the truck, climbing in the passenger seat.

He forgets to close the door, numb to the rain as it runs over the cracked leather.

Dream shuts it quietly, before getting in on the other side.

They pull away from the curb in silence.

George pretends he doesn't see him wiping away tears in the rearview mirror.

\*\*\*\*\*

Coming to a stop in front of his apartment feels a little like dying.

Well, he's never died before, but if anything could sum up the painful hollowness in his chest, that would probably be the closest thing.

The engine goes still, leaving only the sound of rain hitting the windshield. It's oddly comforting. George watches the wipers sweep the water away as time stretches on, not moving from his place buckled in his seat.

"You should probably come get your stuff," he says finally, in a voice that sounds small and foreign.

Dream lets his hand fall from the steering wheel.

"Right."

He gets out first.

\*\*\*\*\*

There's more than George realized.

Pieces of Dream tucked into corners of his home.

A mini chess set. A pair of tennis shoes. The textbook he's been missing for a month. The letterman jacket. All of it goes into an unlabeled cardboard box.

It sits on the table, cold and unforgiving as they pass by it one at a time.

George fucking hates that box. The less empty it gets, the more empty he feels.

He doesn't tell Dream this, as they work in silence, passing assorted items to each other to put away. Somehow though, he can guess Dream feels the same way. Something about his slumped shoulders, and slow gait.

Once they've cleared the kitchen and the living room, George leads the way into his bedroom, determinedly shutting out memories of ping-pong balls hitting the walls and warm fingers slipping into his like puzzle pieces.

He *can't* think about those things. Not now. Maybe not ever.

Dream finds the orange ball on George's desk, hiding behind his computer. It lands in the box dully, then lies there, unmoving.

George clenches the fabric of his jacket and turns away.

A pair of pajama bottoms follow, along with two more hoodies. George can't even determine which ones they are in the moonlight seeping through the blinds.

He's in the middle of checking his drawers for out of place socks when a short intake of breath tears him out of muddled thoughts. He glances across the room, following the source of the sound and promptly has the air knocked out of his lungs.

The silhouetted form of Dream is curved forward slightly, looking down at the familiar book on his bedside table. His hand is splayed tenderly across the cover.

George's lip trembles.

"Dream," he whispers, unsure of why he's saying it. Some sort of chastisement, or plea.

Dream is still.

Until he speaks.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there," he says quietly.

George takes a shaky step back. "Don't."

He continues, pressing his lips together until they're in a thin line. "I'm going to say this, George. If this is it, I need to say it. And you need to listen."

"I don't need apologies. I get it now, okay? I have my answer."

Dream acts like he didn't hear him. George feels desperation claw at his insides.

This conversation needs to end now before he has to relive all of it, hear Dream voice the fears that

have been living in his head for months. He can handle rejection, but he can't handle *this*.

"I should have been there. It just- everything went wrong in the end and the fucking flower shop was closed, so I had to go to the one across town and my keys-"

George starts toward him, hands shaking. "You don't need to do this, Dream."

"-they got lost at the party... hell I shouldn't have even gone to the party, I know, I was just being a stupid social-climbing idiot and-"

"Dream, *stop* !"

He does this time, chest heaving, eyes wide.

George wraps his arms around himself, suddenly feeling too exposed.

"You don't have to do this anymore okay?" He says. "Let's just drop the act and get on with our lives."

Dream's eyes turn steely, confusion burning in the irises.

"...What act?"

"This act." George takes a ragged breath, willing Dream to understand. "The one where you're in love with me."

Dream's lips part in surprise, any words left getting caught in his chest.

George looks at him imploringly, eyebrows drawn. "It was a nice daydream to have for a while. But you don't have to pretend anymore."

Dream sputters for a moment before speaking.

"Where are you getting all this?"

George's expression hardens.

"People talk," he tries, scanning Dream's face for any reaction.

Sure enough, there's a slight twitch of his brow.

George plunges ahead, letting ice cold satisfaction pool in his gut. He needs this. He needs to be numb. "You certainly did, from what I heard. You made it abundantly clear there was nothing between us. Everyone else seems to get it."

He's barely pausing for breath now, forcing each word out like stopping will kill him.

"I think I do too now. You're just another straight guy that thinks it's funny to flirt with the gay kid," he practically spits, words like acid on his tongue. "Piper, the girl I talked to at the party, she looked so fucking sorry for me. I hate that. I *hated* that look."

Dream's face is twisted with something he can't quite discern in the shadows cast throughout the room. It makes his heart pound quicker.

"D-don't you feel sorry for me too," George stammers. "That wasn't... that's not why I said all that. I guess I just want you to know that I'm okay. I don't know if you were keeping this thing up

for shits and giggles, or cause you felt bad for me, but it's done. Whatever *it* is. You can stop now."

Dream closes and uncloses his fists at his side like he doesn't know what to do with them, chest rising and falling quickly.

"I-I don't want to," he finally replies, voice small.

George shortens the distance one more step. "Dream. Please," he begs, in barely more than a whisper. "This is already hard enough. Just- just let me be. You at least owe me that much."

Dream shakes his head.

"No."

George stops in place. "No?"

Dream runs a hand through his hair. "No- I- no you're wrong about all of this."

"Oh so you're telling me you didn't say those things?"

His jaw clenches. "I did. In the moment I was alone, and- and afraid, and froze up and I did. They kept asking me things and I just *didn't know* and I wanted it to stop so I told them what they wanted to hear." He takes a breath. "I regretted it then and I do now."

Green eyes flash up to meet his, intense and pained.

"I will never stop regretting it, George."

Goosebumps prickle his skin, and he finds his mouth suddenly dry. He falters.

"What are you getting at, Dream?"

Dream dares to take a step closer. "They were wrong about all of it, okay? About us. And I was wrong- I've gotten so many things wrong- but I must have gotten a few things right too, because you're in my life, George. And after everything- God, George, you're so damned smart but sometimes you can be so *stupid*!"

"Excuse me?" George scoffs, clutching the bedspread at his back, trying to hide how his voice shakes.

Dream is close now, too close, nervous energy coursing through him in trembling hands and quick breaths.

"Just- fuck, George, can I kiss you?"

George's mind goes blank, heart nearly stopping.

*Dream.*

*Dream is asking to-*

*He-*

His breath hitches. "You-"

Dream is merely hovering now, looking at George with wide eyes, only inches away. "Please."

For a moment, George is frozen in time, taking in Dream with parted lips.

And then, he nods.

Like pieces falling into place, he bows his head and George reaches, grasping for stability wherever he can find it, as Dream finally... *finally*, kisses him.

If earlier was dying, then kissing Dream is *living*.

It's soft at first, still tinged with unsurity. But after a few shocked seconds, George is kissing back, hesitation and fear and every other fucking thing under the sun thrown to the wayside as Dream's lips mold to his.

"Kiss me," George breathes, both of Dream's shaking hands moving to cup his jaw as he takes Dream's lower lip lightly between his teeth.

His hands find golden curls, threading through them mindlessly.

"Kiss me," he says again, feeling lighter than air.

Dream complies, kissing him deeper, fueled on by the gasp that escapes as George's back hits the side of the bed. A giggle bubbles up, only to be swallowed by another press of Dream's lips..

"I'm kissing you," Dream says, and George can feel his smile against his mouth as he punctuates the statement with another kiss.

"You're kissing me." He laughs, tugging lightly on the roots of Dream's hair, earning a choked noise sounding awfully similar to a moan. "Holy shit, Dream you're kissing me."

Dream smiles wider, shifting to drag his lips down the column of George's throat.

"I've wanted to do this for so long," he breathes, and George nearly whimpers as he sucks a mark below his collarbone. "I wanted to do this on New Years. And a million times before that. But I wanted you to remember it. I wanted you to be sure you wanted it."

George closes his eyes, heart racing. "You wanted to kiss me."

Dream trails languid kisses back up his neck. "So badly."

He pulls back, leveling his face with George's, and waits for chocolate eyes to flutter open.

"I have made lots of mistakes, George. And I'm sorry for how they ended up affecting you-making you feel unwanted, making you feel like I wasn't utterly crazy about you."

George smiles softly, tipping their foreheads together.

Dream's voice becomes more choked. "I'm sorry it took so long but I promise you this is real. Real enough to scare me down to my very bones because I've never felt like this before, and I don't want to screw it up."

George runs a thumb over his cheekbone. "You're not going to screw it up."

"I have been known to screw things up. I nearly did."

George pauses, soothing the skin under his palm, thinking. "Then lets screw up together. And fix it again. We're good at that."

Dream deliberates for a moment, then leans forward, kissing him slowly.

"... I think I can do that," he breathes.

George nods. "Okay."

"Okay."

"You know, I can hardly believe that we're doing this. That you did *that*."

Dream's eyes's brighten as offers up a half smirk. "I can do it again if you'd like."

George laughs, wrapping his arms around him. "I would like that... very much so. But maybe after we get your things back out of their boxes."

"Oh right."

He sighs, resting his head on Dream's shoulder. "You know, that was probably the worst breakup I've ever gone through."

"Is that what that was?"

George shrugs. "I mean I figured."

Dream leans to press his lips to the side of George's head. "Damn. Didn't even give me a chance to ask you out before you broke up with me."

"Well you didn't even give me a chance to break up with you before you confessed your undying love for me."

"Not so fast. I didn't say anything about love."

George grins. "Okay then say it now."

Dream hums, tracing lines up and down George's back. "Hm... I think I'll make you wait for it. Give you something to look forward to."

"You're a menace."

"You love me."

"I think you're an idiot."

"I think you should kiss me."

George tilts his head to face him in exasperation, before pulling Dream in by the back of the neck, a barely hidden smile tugging at his lips.

"Oh shut up."

## Chapter End Notes

Only took them 70,000 words ;)

My [Twitter](#)

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Summary

Weightless, glowing, confident, he faces forward once again, limbs falling into place easily.

He breathes.

There's a moment of silence.

And the routine begins.

## Chapter Notes

Well! Here we are! The last official chapter before the epilogue, (which is being posted simultaneously with this chapter by the way). I actually wanted to finish this fic by today, because January 18th is the one year anniversary of All is Fair in Love and Football! It's crazy to think that I've been writing this for a year! It's been such a fun (and difficult) experience, and I'm really proud of how it turned out.

Thank you to my wonderful friends [Ro](#) AJ, and [Logan](#) for beta-ing!

And as always, thanks to all of you for all your support and lovely comments/dms. You inspired me to keep writing this, even when it was hard to find time and motivation.

Hope you enjoy these last two chapters!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Despite George's earlier insistence, they spend another twenty minutes or so making out against nearly every assorted surface in the apartment before getting around to unpacking the boxes. (Not that George minds all that much.)

By the time they pull away, Dream's hair is a complete mess, and George has an obscene amount of hickeys littering his neck and collarbone.

It's late, far too late for them to be bumbling about the kitchen, shushing each other over the top of quiet giggles, but neither can seem to stop. George practically feels like he's floating as Dream sits him on the counter, kissing him forcefully once more, before turning to leaf through his belongings in the boxes.

George takes the time to adjust his shirt, rumpled and untucked, and watches Dream rearrange the contents of his things with barely-hidden admiration.

"Leave that one," he says after a couple minutes of sorting, gesturing towards the dark green hoodie Dream has in his arms. "The letterman too."



Dream raises an eyebrow, but grabs the green and silver jacket anyways. He approaches with it extended out in front of him, then wraps it around George's shoulders.

George smiles, holding it in place proudly by the lapels.

"Anything for you," Dream says with flourish, kissing his cheek before turning back to the box.

He shakes his head slightly in amazement, unable to fight the blush that rises to his cheeks.

Some items stay boxed up— most of the school supplies, and the beat up Nike's Dream has been missing for ages. Others— an extra toothbrush, a couple of hoodies and a pair of sweats, as well as a handful of favorite movies, go back to their places in George's apartment, for his or Dream's use.

"You're not moving in," George teases as Dream places his light pink toothbrush beside George's blue one in the bathroom.

"Yet," Dream replies mischievously, bumping George with his hip. "Besides, now that we aren't estranged tragic lovers, I want to spend more time with you." His voice turns soft, and a little sad. "I've missed you."

George wraps his arm around the blond's waist, leaning into him. "That's not exactly how I would put it," he teases, then turns his face into Dream's shirt. "But I've missed you too, idiot." He glances up at Dream. "Let's just simply never fight again, 'kay? Easy enough."

Dream chuckles, and George feels the vibrations where his hand rests on his stomach. "No promises. I think the two of us combined might be a little too stupid and unpredictable for that one."

George smiles into the warm fabric of his t-shirt, inhaling the familiar scent of spiced cologne and laundry detergent. "Maybe so," he breathes, and Dream dips his head to rest it atop George's. "But no more pretending to hate each other. That was miserable."

"I never hated you," Dream says contemplatively. "Or pretended to hate you."

George reddens, cringing slightly as memories of their first interactions fill his mind. "Yeah... me neither."

Dream snorts. "That's a lie."

"You did not give off the greatest impression at first, okay!"

"You stormed off like every time I tried to have a conversation with you!" Dream pokes his side, and George laughs, rolling his eyes.

"I did not!"

"Did too! I literally tried to drop hints that I was interested so many times, but you kept cockblocking me!"

George scoffs at him, wide eyed. "Dream!"

"What? It's true!"

"Wait, so..." George pauses, looking at their intertwined reflection in the bathroom mirror. "How long exactly have you had feelings for me?"

Dream furrows his brows, thinking. After a few seconds, he responds.

“Well, I figured out pretty quick after the first few times we hung out that I, uh... felt something.”

George nods slowly, reaching for his hand and squeezing it. Dream interlaces their fingers, squeezing back in assurance.

“And then when I had that meltdown... thing—in the locker room, and you stayed with me even though you were mad at me and I didn’t really deserve it... that... I knew then, I think. It meant a lot.”

George’s throat tightens, and he nods again.

“I didn’t realize it’s been that long,” he murmurs. “I spent forever convincing myself I was just making things up... it’s weird hearing you say it.”

Dream shifts, wrapping his arms around him from behind and resting his chin on his shoulder. George leans into the touch, tilting his head so their cheeks press together lightly. Dream sighs.

“To be honest, I thought I was the one going crazy. One second it felt like you were right there with me, and the next it was like it never happened.”

George winces. “Yeah. Sorry about that.”

“No need to be sorry,” Dream replies lightheartedly. “I’m just glad we finally worked it out.”

With the hand not currently holding Dream’s, George rakes through tousled blond curls. Dream closes his eyes and hums.

“I can’t help but feel like all of this is just a good dream, and I’m going to wake up and you’ll be gone,” George admits, tracing tenderly over Dream’s knuckles. “After all this time it seems too good to be true.”

“There’s only one way to find out, I guess,” Dream says, nudging his shoulder lightly before guiding him back towards the bedroom. “I’ll stay with you.”

When George raises his eyebrows, he continues, though he doesn’t need much convincing.

“And then in the morning, I’ll kiss you awake and remind you all over again.”

George smiles, looking up at him with fond amusement. “You’re going to fit on my twin mattress?”

Dream shrugs. “We’re going to cuddle up close and make it work.”

“I wouldn’t mind that,” he admits contentedly.

Dream steals a quick kiss, before striding ahead.

He flops down on the bed unceremoniously, and when George hesitates, fighting back giggles, Dream tugs him onto the mattress with him.

“Shove over, you absolute giant,” George protests, pulling the covers over the top of them as Dream sprawls out over as much of the bed as possible.

“Give me a goodnight kiss first,” the blond replies cheekily, turning to face him while wrinkling

his nose.

“You and your dramatics,” George sighs, but needs no further convincing to lean forward and press his lips to Dream’s, pulling him in by the back of the neck.

Like magic, Dream’s starfish limbs shrink down to size and curl inward, all wrapping around George like a magnet, drawing him closer.

Dream still has his eyes closed when they part.

George nudges his nose against his cheek, lips turned upward.

“How was that?”

Dream wraps an arm around his waist, soft lips brushing against his temple.

“Perfect.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The next few days pass in a whirlwind of shared brunches and stolen kisses. Hands held under the blanket during movie nights like they’re middle schoolers, and sappy sticky notes left up around each other’s apartments.

George feels stupidly in love—acts it, too—but he could not give less of a shit if he looks like an absolute fool singing off-key while making breakfast.

Even the beginning of the new semester isn’t enough to dampen his spirits.

Dream walks him to class when he can and picks him up from practice for spontaneous trips to the movies or the ice cream parlor. Once, they almost get caught in the middle of school hours by Bad and Quackity, who they notice walking up to George’s car in the nick of time to climb haphazardly out of the back seat and straighten their out of place clothes.

“We were seeing if you had an extra charger, cause Bad’s laptop died,” Quackity says slowly, looking between them with narrowed eyes. “But it looks like you’re busy.”

“Not at all!” Dream replies, with a little too much enthusiasm to be convincing. “Uh- here Bad, you can borrow mine.”

Bad takes it gratefully, turning on heel to leave. “Awesome! Thank you two!”

Quackity remains, arms folded across his chest.

Dream waves, but after a quick glance at George, freezes, and instead moves his hand to cover the very obvious hickey on his neck. “Have a nice day!”

George practically chokes at the action, trying to hold in his laughter.

Quackity doesn’t seem convinced, but eventually gets bored of staring them down to trail after Bad back to class.

The second their friends are out of sight George is cackling, practically falling into Dream’s lap.

“Have a nice day?!” He questions, shoulders shaking uncontrollably. “Have a nice day? Really, Dream? You sound like you’re working customer service or something!”

Dream throws his hands up in the air, an exasperated grin splitting across his face. “What was I supposed to do? I was panicked, okay!”

George only laughs harder, not stopping until they’re both holding their sides and gasping for air.

By the end of the day, they reason to tell their friends, knowing that it’s only a matter of time before the group finds out.

That is, the *plan* is to tell them formally... before several text messages from Karl come through in the middle of dinner with a loud succession of *dings* .

**Today 11:21 AM**

***Karl***

*Q SAID HE SAW YOU WITH DREAM??*

***Karl***

*DID YOU TWO MAKE UP*

***Karl***

*QUACKITY SAYS YOU WERE MAKING OUT WERE YOU ACTUALLY MAKING OUT*

***Karl***

*GEORGE ISTG IF YOU DON'T CALL ME BACK AND EXPLAIN*

***Karl***

*SOMETHING MUST HAVE HAPPENED WHAT HAPPENED*

***Karl***

*CALL MEEEEEE*

George winces as he attempts to turn down his volume, opening Karl’s contact as quickly as he is able.

“Looks like they might have already figured it out,” Dream observes, face lit up with amusement.

“I think I need to take this,” George replies, patting Dream’s cheek teasingly and pressing the call button with a grin. It doesn’t take long to explain the recent developments to Karl, who responds with endless relief and enthusiasm.

“I think Quackity already knows, and he probably explained to Bad,” George confesses, Karl now on speaker phone in the middle of the table.

*“And I may or may not have already told Sapnap,”* Karl replies with an awkward laugh.

Dream shakes his head in mock shock and disapproval and George snickers.

“What did you even tell him?”

*“That you guys are together now, I guess. Are you together? Like, is that official now?”*

George glances up at Dream with a little hesitation. Dream shrugs, deferring to him with a look of curiosity.

“It... feels weird putting a name on it, I suppose. It’s still just... us.”

*“But?”* Karl prompts, and George swallows.

“But... I mean, yeah. I’m certainly okay with making it official, as long as Dream is. Want to be boyfriends, Dream?”

At that, Dream perks up, trying and failing to hide the biggest grin imaginable, expression bright.

When George meets his eyes across the table, he nods rapidly, mouthing a very enthusiastic “Yes.”

“I think we are in the clear on that front,” he says, trying not to laugh as Dream pumps his fist dramatically. “So yeah, I guess that’s everything.”

*“I guess so,”* Karl chuckles. *“I was beginning to think it would never happen, but I’m glad you proved me wrong. I’m really happy for both of you.”*

George smiles softly. “Thank you, Karl. You’re the best.”

*“I absolutely am. See you tomorrow, George, where I’ll be sure to squeeze the life out of you in person.”*

“Sounds like a plan, you weirdo. See you.”

The second the line goes dead, George slumps forward in relief. “Well, that went well.”

Dream whoops, standing up from his chair. He rushes around the table, and in a swift movement, lifts George up in the air. “Holy shit! We’re boyfriends, like, actually? You’re my boyfriend?”

George laughs, kicking his legs until Dream puts him down. “Yes, idiot. That sound good to you?”

Dream responds by kissing him breathless, nearly toppling George with the effort.

“Dream!” He giggles trying and failing to pull away as Dream peppers kisses all over his face.

“Dream!”

“What? Can’t a guy kiss his *boyfriend*?” He chides drawing out the last word with a lopsided grin.

George blushes, putting a hand in front of his face. “Stop, you can’t just keep doing that,” he groans, though there’s no malice behind it.

Dream pays no mind, ducking under his hand to pull George into an embrace, immediately nuzzling his face in his neck.

“I can, and I will,” he says determinedly, though the words are muffled in George’s skin.

“You are a loser,” George says in false exasperation, knowing that in reality he sounds equally as smitten, words dripping with fondness.

“I’m yours though,” Dream mumbles, and the statement makes George’s stomach flutter.

He kisses the top of Dream’s head, wrapping his arms around him tightly.

“That’s true,” he concedes tenderly. “I’m yours, and you’re mine.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Making your relationship with your boyfriend official is great for a multitude of reasons.

For one, you can cuddle during movie nights with friends *without* pretending that you “accidentally” fell asleep on their shoulder. (George only tried that one once before everyone found out, and the excuse was admittedly pretty flimsy.)

Secondly, your boyfriend can wait *inside* the gym to pick you up from cheer practice, instead of sitting alone in the hallway, counting the ceiling tiles. And you get to watch his face each time you land a back handspring (which is pretty sweet).

Making your relationship with your boyfriend official means no more sneaking around. No more white lies. It’s chaste kisses in doorsteps and dorm rooms and empty school hallways. It’s fingers intertwined, swinging gently as you walk the loop around the pond, and hands connected between the car seats during late night drives when one of you can’t sleep.

It’s freeing.

However, it’s also scrutinizing looks, and whispers, and rumors.

It’s better now than it was in middle school and high school, but George knows that the reality is that no matter where in the world they go, or how old they are, there will always be people that will disapprove of him and Dream. People who will think they need fixing. Most keep it to themselves, giving nothing more than mildly scathing looks, but George knows that others feel the need to express their displeasure in more obvious ways. And no matter how many rallying friends and family members they have at their back, they’re in for a couple fights in their life.

That knowledge doesn’t at all prepare him for when he comes face to face with a familiar dark-haired, sweaty lughead on an unassuming Monday morning.

George hadn’t wanted to come, telling Dream he still needed to pack for competitions tomorrow, but Dream had insisted the trip to the school wouldn’t take long. He only needed to pick up the last of his football gear from his locker, then they could be on their way (and go out to lunch if George so pleased).

Bored of sitting around the apartment, George agreed.

It's strange, walking into the empty locker room now, seeing as the last time he was there it was to coax a crying Dream out from behind the shower curtain. The place is equally empty as it was that evening months ago, but it's far less intimidating (though it still stinks).

George tells Dream as much a minute after they've gone in, as he trails leisurely around the edges of the room.

"It smells terrible in here. Do none of you jocks know how to use deodorant?"

Dream smirks at his comment, fiddling with the combo on his dark green locker. "Some of us do."

"Not you. You stink."

Dream scoffs. "That's a lie and you know it. I smell wonderful."

George dances onto the bench Dream is sitting on, grabbing his head for balance before leaning down and sniffing dramatically. "Nope. Disgusting. Actual garbage."

Dream rolls his eyes, pulling the locker open with one hand and grabbing George's wrist lightly with the other. He looks up at him, an innocent smile on his face.

"If I smell so bad, why are you always stealing my clothes?"

Now it's George's turn to scoff. "Whatever. I just like seeing if you'll notice they're gone."

Dream's grin grows wider, and he turns back to his football gear. "Mhm."

Bored, George climbs down from the bench and sits down next to him, laying his head on Dream's shoulder as he folds grass-stained jerseys and padding into his bag.

George lets his eyes drift close.

"Can we get McDonald's after this?" he hums, tapping Dream's ankle with the toe of his shoe.

"Yeah, I guess I still owe you from that one..."

Dream goes quiet.

George is about to prompt him to finish his sentence when he notices the squeaking of tennis shoes against tile. His eyes flash open just as Dream tenses beneath him.

A new voice reverberates against the walls of the room, ugly black and red tennis shoes coming to a stop. "Oh. I didn't realize this place was... occupied."

Dream's familiar teammate stands just beyond the entrance to the locker room, eyeing them with a shit-eating grin. He has one meaty hand resting leisurely on the wall, the other in the pocket of his sweats.

Dream glares at him. "What do you want, Chase?"

George moves subtly away from Dream. As soon as he does so, he feels the beginnings of guilt and fear churning in his stomach. Guilt for getting them caught. Guilt for even *worrying* about getting caught. Because they're supposed to be over this. He doesn't need to be apologetic to Dream, or this asshole, or anyone.

It's different from before. *They're* different.

But... the fear is there too. Nagging at the back of his mind. Bringing up things he'd rather forget. Reminding him that last time Dream let him fall, left him alone.

No, no, *now is different* . Dream *won't* do that again.

*But where does that leave them?*

George begins to shove things into Dream's bag.

The boy, Chase, lifts his hands in a shrug. "Just grabbing my shit. Same as you dude, chill."

He takes a couple steps forward toward his own locker, eyes still on them.

George feels Dream shift closer.

Once Chase has his back turned, opening the lock, they go back to emptying Dream's locker in silence, knees pressing together on the bench.

The small spot of contact warms George. Wordlessly, he knows it's Dream's way of saying *I'm here. I'm here and I'm not leaving you again*. The thought calms his pounding heartbeat, if only a little bit.

Across the room, the metal door bangs open, and Chase pushes his hair back, looking at them over one shoulder.

"So were you like, making out in here before I came in?" He asks, smirking.

"No," George answers shortly, relishing in the way the boy's sneer falls away a little.

"Don't worry, I wouldn't tell," Chase says. Cold, dark eyes turn to Dream. "Wouldn't want to give away your little secret, huh?"

Before George can respond, Dream cuts in, lips pressed into a thin line.

"There's no secret, Chase," he says evenly. "Seems like you're just out of the loop. As usual."

Chase snorts, observing them for a few seconds, before standing. "Clue me in then."

Dream's eyes narrow. "What?"

"Clue me in." A shrug. "I mean, last I checked you were very adamant on the fact that you wanted nothing to do with... *him* ." He points at George.

"George," Dream supplies, coldly. "Not *him* ."

Chase nods disinterestedly. "You wanted nothing to do with *George* , despite the fact you've been hanging around him since the beginning of the year like a parasite. And I figured, hey, I've led people on for the fun of it before too— who am I to judge?"

"He wasn't leading me on, clearly," George mutters, inclining his head towards Dream, steely eyes still on the man in front of him. "You dickheads just backed him into a corner."

"You're not the first jackass I've lied to," Dream adds, arms folded. "Sorry you believed it so quickly."

Chase laughs this time, throwing his head back. "Oh, you think I believed that bullshit?" He sighs,



advancing closer. “I mean, I neither knew nor care if you actually gave a shit about your little side project here, but believe me when I say, Dream, I always knew you were a *fucking cocksucker* .”

George doesn’t know if Dream standing spurs him into action, or if it’s the other way around, but in a moment of perfectly controlled fury, George strides forward two steps and kicks Chase *hard* in the balls.

The boy crumples instantly, crying out and holding himself as he sinks to the cold porcelain floor.

Before either of them can react, George slings Dream’s now-full football bag over his shoulder, grabs him by the elbow, and tugs him hastily out of the locker room, leaving Chase behind them.

\*\*\*\*\*

“I still can’t believe you did that,” Dream says, for what’s probably the third time in the past couple hours, kicking his feet behind him distractedly. “Like, I’ve always known you were a badass, but it even caught me off guard.”

George smiles, not turning around as he leafs through his suitcase. “Alright, alright, you can stop singing my praises now.”

Dream rolls onto his stomach from his place on George’s bed, resting his chin on his folded arms. “You know what, I’ll say it— it was hot.”

“*Dream*,” George groans lightheartedly, throwing a rolled up pair of socks at him.

“What? It’s true!”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“And *you’re* hot. And badass. And that sweater looks really nice on you.”

“Oh my gosh, shut up,” George laughs, rolling his eyes, even as a blush finds its way onto his face. “I told you I wouldn’t be able to focus with you here.”

“My apologies,” Dream says, though he doesn’t sound apologetic at all. “I would *never* want to distract you.”

“You would,” George replies. “That’s like, ninety percent of what you do when we’re together.”

“Guess I’m just too charming.”

George snorts, and they both fall into a fit of giggles.

Despite his teasing though, Dream does settle down after a while, laying back in George’s mess of pillows while he tries to keep his eyes open.

“Tell me about competitions,” he hums, yawning into his arm. “I realized I don’t even know how they work.”

George complies, folding a couple extra shirts into his bag.

“Well to start, all the colleges are sorted into divisions based on the size of your team— same as football. And you only compete with the other teams in your division. There’s three rounds, four if you make it to semi-finals. You practice for a while, warm up, do your routine, receive adjudication, then go to the awards ceremony later that night.”

“And Disney?”

“We spend the next day in Disney, yes.”

“I wish I could come,” he groans dramatically. “We could have a cute little date.”

“Not my fault you had to... what was it again? Babysit your sister?”

“Uh... yeah,” Dream says, and George isn’t sure if he’s imagining the hint of nervousness in his voice.

“Isn’t Drista, like, fifteen?” He asks, and Dream shrugs.

“I don’t know man, I’m just following orders. Guess she needed a ride to school or something.” He rolls over onto his stomach, face turned away. “Anyways, what comes next? After you Disney day or whatever.”

“After that I come back home,” George finishes, pushing aside his confusion at Dream’s reaction. “Not very interesting.”

Whatever discomfort had been in his demeanor before quickly drops, as Dream sends a hopeful glance his way.

“And then we watch back the video, and you explain every little detail to me, right?”

George nods. “If that’s what you really want.”

“Of course it is,” Dream insists, offering his hand. George takes it. “I want to learn all about this stuff, since it’s what you love. And as a bonus... we can cuddle.” Dream pulls him in by his wrist, quickly enveloping him in his arms.

George hardly resists, stumbling onto the bed with him with a laugh.

All at once, the light chill that had settled over him in the over-air conditioned apartment is gone, the warmth of Dream’s skin settling comfortably around him. George turns into it, burying his nose in the crook of Dream’s neck and breathing deeply, letting the stress of the day slowly bleed out of him.

As he presses a kiss to delicate collarbones, a thought enters his mind– familiar by now, but still exhilarating.

*I love you .*

*I love you, I love you, I love you.*

He could say it now, with Dream’s pulse loud in his ears. He could whisper it in the shell of his ear, and it would be with absolute certainty, and conviction. Dream would say it back, he knows, would kiss him silly for it, but there will be plenty of time for that.

For now, he will lie here until their breathing becomes synchronized, slow and steady, making George’s eyelids heavy.

For now, they sleep in their day clothes, shoved onto a bed too small for both of them, soothed into warm unconsciousness by the other’s embrace.

\*\*\*\*\*

As the school year starts anew with spring semester, the cheerleading season draws closer and closer to its end. The departure date for competitions is drawing ever closer, and though they've been preparing tirelessly these past few weeks, the idea that they're actually going to be performing in a few days still feels strange.

Puffy can sense their nerves, better than anyone, and she does what she can to instill her confidence into the team as they perfect their final routine.

"You excited?" She asks George after practice, as the rest of the team filters out for the weekend. "You should be. This is all you, you know. They're gonna kill it."

George watches the uniformed figures dwindle as they walk out the door, making lighthearted conversation about the week to come and what they'll do during their break. He leans against the wall, glancing at Puffy.

"I think you can take at least a little credit," He replies with a smirk.

Puffy shrugs. "Okay. You're right. I am the greatest coach ever, thank you, George"

"The nosiest maybe."

She punches him playfully. "Hey, someone's got to look out for you guys. You college students would just wither away if someone didn't remind you to eat every once in a while."

George laughs. "Maybe so."

"Speaking of which— get some sleep okay? I know that football boy of yours probably wants to take you out for the weekend, but tell him he's gotta wait 'til next week. Coach's orders."

George blinks a few times, mouth dropping open a little as he feels his face grow hot. "How do you-?"

Puffy smiles. "I see him hanging around outside like a lost puppy whenever I leave practice. And I *also* see him light up the second you come out. I can put two and two together." She pauses. "Also, Karl told me during my lunch break."

George groans, burying his face in his hands. "Of course."

"Hey, it's nothing to be embarrassed about. All I care about is seeing my team happy and healthy and you seem to be excelling especially on both fronts since this boy came around. I'm happy for you, George."

"Thanks, Puffy," he concedes, starting to collect his things, still pleasantly flustered.

Puffy grabs her own duffel bag and keys, before waiting by the door. "Is he coming to watch competitions?" She asks, shifting her weight to one hip.

"I don't want to bother him with it," George waves her off in reply. "It's like a four hour drive, and he's insisting we watch the recording afterwards anyway."

Puffy shrugs. "Hey, whatever works. As long as he gets to see you out there kicking ass."

George laughs, leading the way out of the gym as Puffy locks up.

"Don't worry, just for you, I'll make sure of it."

\*\*\*\*\*

George arrives at the cheer bus five minutes late, only because Dream insists on taking him for “good luck breakfast bagels” the instant he wakes up.

Teeth are brushed side by side, with their hips and elbows bumping each other, and Dream spends the whole time humming cheerleading chants with a mouthful of toothpaste. George teases him for it, but secretly he’s starting to think he’s going to pull a muscle in his cheeks with how often he smiles around Dream.

“You’re going to do amazing,” Dream calls as George stumbles hurriedly out of his truck to avoid holding up the team any longer. “Don’t forget your water bottle! And your headphones! Be safe!”

“You sound like my mom,” George replies with a laugh, blowing him a kiss as he jogs over to the long gray travel bus.

Dream grins, waving one last goodbye before pulling out of the parking lot.

The moment he’s gone, all the built up adrenaline and nervousness kicks into George’s system full-time, and he fights to not trip as he climbs the steps and hops into the padded seat beside Karl and behind Puffy.

“I’m so sorry,” he gets out breathlessly, shoving his gear underneath the seat as Puffy looks on with a smile.

“You know, I can’t even be mad,” she replies with a chuckle, gesturing for the bus driver to close the doors. “He is absolutely darling.”

Karl elbows him, making no effort to muffle the giggle that follows. “George thinks so too.”

George merely scoffs, slouching into the cheap leather, despite the blush that seems to have overcome his entire body. “Yeah, I guess,” he mumbles shyly, already digging into his bag for a distraction.

It seems to work well enough, as he places a pack of fruit snacks and a lone earbud in a delighted Karl’s hand.

“You can aux for the first hour,” he tells him as the bus jolts forward, beginning their journey south to Orlando. “In exchange for no teasing.”

Karl levels him with agonized stare, biting his lip as he looks between George and the earbud rolling in his palm.

“Only if I can play anime music too,” he says finally, after a loud exhale.

“Deal,” George says quickly, patting his hand and passing him the phone.

Finally off the hook, the brunet relaxes into Karl’s side, closing his eyes as he tips his head back. The slow rumble of the bus manages to set his mind at ease, at least a little, so he focuses on that, letting it blend into the lively chatter around him.

Karl scrolls... and scrolls... and stops.

Feeling a gentle nudge, he opens his eyes again to find Karl with his finger hovering over the play button, the biggest shit-eating grin he can muster turned almost innocently in George’s direction.

Karl clears his throat pointedly.

By the time he plays the song it's too late.

"You motherfucker," George mutters with a chuckle, pinching him lightly, before giving in, letting the opening lyrics to one of the well-loved albums on his playlist wash over him.

*"Are you in love?"*

\*\*\*\*\*

The event center in Orlando is predictably chaotic, coaches and cheerleaders bustling around and calling for teammates in a rainbow of different colored uniforms. The air is practically buzzing with excitement, voices carrying and jumbling together over the seemingly ever-constant background music.

George remembers the first time he attended the UCA nationals two years ago as a freshman, wandering the Disney parks skittishly in his spare time to avoid the chaos of the competition area.

Now, he welcomes it, trying to get a peek of any of the distance stages as they file forward towards their lockers.

"I think I'm gonna puke, I'm so excited," Karl says, bouncing on the balls of his feet, a step or two behind George. "I can't believe I missed this last year."

"Yeah and made me ride the ferris wheel *alone*," George fires back, teasingly.

Karl rolls his eyes. "Keep up your whining and you'll be riding alone again," he says, and George knocks their shoulders together in retaliation.

By the time they get in uniform, there's still half an hour to kill before they're even set to go practice, leaving George to lay back in an unclaimed patch of grass between Karl and Niki.

"I'm bored," he groans, flopping down beside them. "Did someone bring cards or something?"

"C'mon Karl, you're the fun guy," Niki claims, pointing a finger at him lazily. "Entertain us."

However, it's like Karl hasn't even heard her— typing rapidly as he worries his lip between his teeth.

"Karl?" George prompts, trying to look over his shoulder at what he can only assume are his texts with Sapnap (or something equally embarrassing).

But from the quick flash George sees before he drops it back into his lap, the profile picture is uncharacteristically blank. And there's a distinct lack of fire emojis by the contact name.

"Who were you texting?" He asks curiously, nudging his friend as he attempts to peek again.

"Niki, do you want churros? Let's all go get churros," Karl replies, hastily shoving his phone in his pocket and pasting a bright smile on his face.

George studies him, raising an eyebrow. "Why are you so insistent on—"

Before he can even finish his sentence though, Karl has an arm looped in his, tugging him to his feet.

He scoffs. “Dude, what are you even-?”

“Hurry up, George!” Niki interrupts, already up and dancing just ahead of them like nothing has happened. “I found a coupon online, and I want to use it before I forget.”

“Are you sure we should even eat a bunch of churros before we compete?” George says, though his concerns fall on deaf ears as he’s dragged to another section of the park.

They weave through the throng of endless tourists, following the ever-present smell of baked bread and cinnamon. George takes a deep breath, holding the sweetness in his lungs for a few moments, before sighing deeply. Maybe a snack wouldn’t be so bad.

It doesn’t take long for them to find a churro stand, with Niki in the lead and Karl and George close behind. The line stretches back at least ten feet, with nothing to provide cover from the hot sun, but George allows himself to be pulled into the back of the line with minimal complaining.

It’s only when Karl pulls out his phone again, this time stepping away to take a call, that he begins to grow antsy again.

“You don’t think that’s weird at all?” He questions, shifting his weight to one foot.

“Think what’s weird?” Niki asks absentmindedly, humming along to whatever tinny-sounding Disney song is playing on the speakers overhead.

George huffs. “The phone thing. He said his grandmother called, but I’m pretty sure he’s mentioned that she barely knows how to use a cell phone. And he was texting someone earlier too.”

“Don’t be nosy, George,” Niki chides lightheartedly. “Maybe Granny Jacobs took a technology lesson just to be able to encourage her grandson on his big day.”

“Mhm, sure.”

“Hey, you never know!”

George gives Niki an unimpressed look, and she laughs, shoving him lightly.

“C’mon, just relax. I’m sure it’s nothing important. I’m sure Karl will give us a full run-down of anything interesting tonight during dinner.”

As if right on cue, Karl smiles into the phone, glancing up at the two of them from his space across the pathway. He nods twice, saying something inaudible, before hanging up and coming back to join them with a spring in his step.

“Did I miss anything?” He says, a little breathlessly, as soon as he’s back in line.

George glances at Niki, who merely shrugs her shoulders.

“Nothing much. Just shit-talking your grandmother.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Practice and warm up flies by far faster than George would like.

The team runs their routine just enough times to re-familiarize themselves after the day of driving and wandering around, but not too much as to tire them out.

George partially wishes for more time, a couple more hours (or days, or weeks) to allow his nerves to settle properly, but he figures it's better now than never.

His limbs are fully stretched and warm by now, humming with anticipation, but goosebumps still prickle his skin every once in a while— if he thinks too hard about going out in front of all those people— in front of *judges* . He may be a junior in college, but he supposes this part will never get easier.

The rest of the team is in varying levels of stress, some of them pacing the border of the room with headphones in for the time being, others laughing and chatting with friends like it's any ordinary day.

Glancing over, Puffy seems to be a mix of the two, a picture of perfect calm on the outside, betrayed only by her fidgeting hands and the pen that taps continually against her clipboard. George smiles at the sight, feeling some sense of comfort and solidarity from the fact that even their coach is nervous.

Taking a swig from his water bottle, he glances at the clock on his phone. *3:08 p.m.* They're due to get in places any time now.

George feels a brief zip of adrenaline through his veins at that thought, and forces himself to relax his tense muscles.

They can *do* this. *He* can do this.

Nothing to be scared about. Briefly, he wishes he had invited his mother to come watch. It's a busy time of the year for her, and the drive was a little out of the way, so he hadn't bothered. Still, it would have been nice to have a familiar face in the crowd.

Some of Karl's siblings who live nearby will be there though, as well as Wilbur and Sapnap. Plus, Puffy, of course, ever supportive from the sidelines.

Still, he misses the early days of local cheer camps, where his mother would purposely show up early to pick him up, just to tuck herself away on the stands of the gym and watch the last of practice, a hidden smile on her face.

Glancing around at the team, *his* team, he can't help but think she would be proud of him.

"Alright guys, it's time!" Puffy calls, gesturing at the new notification on her phone. "Everyone take a deep breath, tighten your shoelaces, and go kick some ass like I know you can."

\*\*\*\*\*

As the announcer's voice echoing out their introduction overhead, the Northview cheer team filters onto the empty black stage, turning blue with the light at their back.

With the first step onto the slightly cushioned material, the crowd starts to cheer and applaud, a couple people whistling over the top of it.

As George leads them forward, steps crisp and confident, he chances a glance toward the stands behind the judges, seeing if he can spot Wilbur or any other supporters from their school.

He doesn't see Wilbur first though.

He sees his mother.

His mother, wearing an expensive forest-green blouse, hands clasped together excitedly, turning to her left to whisper something to...

To his father. And Jane. And Miles and Cameron and Betty all dressed in their school colors for the occasion.

At his mother's right, someone laughs, and George nearly cries because there's only one person in the world that laughs like that.

Dream holds his sides as he wheezes, murmuring a reply to his mother before turning his gaze on George. In that predictable, lovesick way George's stomach swoops, and he feels the breath temporarily leave his lungs.

Dream smiles, cheeks pink, eyes bright, and gives a shrug that seems to say, "*What are you looking at?*"

George shakes his head dazedly, and nearly trips when he hears someone whoop out his name, followed by Karl's from the row behind Dream.

It's Quackity, because of course it is, with Sapnap shouting right along with him, Bad and Callahan at his side, wincing and chuckling a little at the noise. Just ahead of them, on Dream's right, Julie and Drista glance at the boys behind them, giggling to themselves as they lean subtly away from the overlapping hollers of support.

Back on the stage, Karl passes George from behind, and he turns his head instinctively. But before George can ask his friend if he was in on this whole thing, Karl gives him a quick grin and a pat on the back, crossing to the other side of the stage and finding his position.

*That wonderful sly bastard.*

"-Small Co-ed Division One, Round One, competing in Traditional."

George shakes his head lightly, trying to ground himself back to the present as he catches the last of their team announcement.

Right. They're performing. Now.

In a surprising turn of events, the shock of the past fifteen seconds seems to have overshadowed any remaining nerves, leaving only a dull buzz of happiness and excitement in his system.

A couple feet away from him, Niki raises her eyebrows, inclining her head towards him slightly. The message is clear.

*"Ready?"*

He nods, letting out a quick sigh.

Even as the crowd settles, George feels their eyes on him. He can't help but glance up once more.

Dream is already looking at him.

*"You've got it, Captain,"* The blond mouths silently, features soft, and George feels his heart swell.

Weightless, glowing, confident, he faces forward once again, limbs falling into place easily.

He breathes.



There's a moment of silence.

And the routine begins.

\*\*\*\*\*

In all of George's past competitions—where tension strung up like a tightrope beneath his feet, as his body found itself stuck between freezing up in terror and exploding with internalized adrenaline—he always slipped into a sort of third-person perspective.

Muscles flexed at their own accord, joints adjusted, and lithe feet directed themselves forward while George merely watched blankly, smiling through it all. Steps and stunts that seemed hazy at best in his consciousness were executed perfectly, the months, years, of practice leaving no room for error, even in this moment of peril.

Competition after competition went by with near perfect precision, excellent form, and enough energy to light up the whole stage. And they were great. The moments after, pose held in place as he caught his breath, trying to recall a single thing that had happened in the past three minutes... were great. Genuinely.

There's a certain rush, he thinks, to relinquishing control, and to trusting your body to do well what you have trained it to do.

But it's different.

It's different than the wave of eagerness, confidence, that crashes over George as the music starts to play.

It's different— *seeing* the crowd, looking across every face, familiar or not, and feeling their energy surge onto the stage.

It's different, taking a step, running, leaping, feeling gravity turn upside down, not because it's what you've trained for, but because you *want* to. Because each time he leaves the mat, suspended in midair, each time he links arms with the boys and girls he's spent nearly every day with for the past year, he leaves behind a sense of joy, bouncing around the space until the air everywhere feels sharper, and brighter.

For maybe the first time, his movement is his own. And his head is blissfully clear.

Time in this room passes as a microcosm, until George is sure this group are the only ones in existence, all captured together in the same breathtaking moment.

The moment settles. Not breaks, but settles, like freshly fallen snow. And George stands in the midst of it, holding a final pose with the lights on his face, his team at his back.

The crowd applauds.

\*\*\*\*\*

It's a little odd, following that first performance with two more rounds of competition. After all, he feels like he could probably go home now and still feel content with what they've done today.

Despite that though, the team performs again an hour later, and once more after that, each time cheered on by their audience of more than a few supporters.

The thrill isn't quite the same in the rounds that follow, and bear a mistake or two, but George could care less, enjoying every minute on the stage more than he ever has before.

The rest of the team loosens up too, letting their nervousness simmer into sheer enjoyment by the time they take the floor for the elusive semi-finals round.

Five other teams besides Northview are called to compete– school rivals, Cedar Peak, and previous champions, University of Alabama– among them.

George wishes, as he eyes the exit to the waiting room, that they could watch, but with Northview up last they have to be ready.

Luckily, Wilbur comes back to report on most of what he's seen from the audience, informing them that most everyone will likely be scoring in the high eighties to early nineties. Hard scores to beat.

"I think you're pretty much neck in neck with the other potential top three teams right now," he explains, looking at the scoring for the previous rounds. "So as long as there aren't any glaring mistakes, and you guys keep up the work you're doing, we could have a shot at placing for sure. Just relax, and trust yourselves."

Easier said than done, George knows, but at this point he could probably do the routines blindfolded, so it can't go too badly. Plus, everyone seems to be finding a groove, making up for each other's weaknesses and thriving off the energy of the crowd.

Too quickly, it's their turn to go on.

Quickly clasping hands and reassuring a couple of the girls that still seem nervous as he passes, George makes his way to the front of the line, leading them through the double doors.

Hearing the last of the music from the previous team fade away, he turns back to face his team, holding up his pointer finger.

"*One more*," he mouths to them, nodding his head encouragingly. "*Let's do it.*"

\*\*\*\*\*

By 7:00 p.m., the event center is packed.

Hundreds of cheerleaders fill the seats around them, all of them chattering to each other excitedly, waving teammates and coaches over to their section.

Dream is sitting in the row behind him, along with the rest of their families and friends, most of whom are currently entertained by Quackity and Sapnap trying to see who can chug a *Monster* faster.

"Are you nervous?" Dream asks, leaning over his seat to rest his chin on George's shoulder.

"Of what? Losing?" He waves a hand in dismissal. "Nah, once we're done with the rounds I'm usually good on the nerves front. It's all mostly for fun and improvement's sake anyways, so it doesn't really matter if we place."

Dream hums, playing absentmindedly with the hair at the nape of George's neck.

"I still think you'll win anyways," he says and George snorts.

“Thank you for the vote of confidence.”

“Anytime.”

Suddenly, someone is tapping them both on the shoulders.

“Look! I think they’re starting!” Drista hisses, pointing towards the stage.

Sure enough, a woman in perfectly pressed brown slacks, and a white blouse is headed straight for the microphone, an envelope in her hand. Just behind her, a dark haired man comes out from the curtains standing to the right of the table of gleaming trophies and medals.

The woman taps the microphone once.

“This thing on?” She asks, pausing to get the ok from her colleague. Once he, and several other people in the audience nod in confirmation, she continues, voice booming.

“Welcome everyone back to UCA College Nationals! We’re so glad to have you all here this weekend!”

The audience cheers, applauding enthusiastically.

The announcer flashes a brilliant smile, tapping her envelope against the podium in front of her, almost teasingly.

“Alright! We love to hear it. Now, as much as I’d like to keep the secrets of this envelope to myself a little longer, I think you folks have waited long enough. Who’s ready to give out some awards?”

Another round of applause.

“Well, without further ado, let’s start with the All Girls Game Day winners for today!”

It’s funny, because although George has been to this competition several times, he always forgets how long it takes to get to the Co-Ed section of the awards ceremony.

By the time the all girls Game Day and Traditional awards have been handed out, and pictures have been taken, he’s slouching in his seat, knee bouncing anxiously.

“I hate the waiting,” he mutters to no one, and Niki gives him a sympathetic smile.

“At least we’re next, right?” She reasons, and George glances down at the schedule on his phone to confirm it.

Just as his eyes skim down to their section, the host pulls out a new sheet of paper from the envelope in her hand.

“Moving on to our next category, Co-Ed Traditional.”

George looks back up, sitting a little straighter.

“That’s you!” Dream whispers loudly, and George gives him a thumbs up over his shoulder.

*It’s time.*

“There was some amazing talent shown out there today from these Co-Ed cheerleaders. All of you deserve an award to be sure. But I have here our three top teams, which went above and beyond.

Same as the previous rounds, all winning members will receive a medal and a certificate, as well as a team trophy to take back to their school.”

Beside him, Karl grabs his hand, squeezing it tightly.

“Here we go,” he breathes, and George squeezes back.

The woman clears her throat, unfolding the paper. “In third place for the Co-Ed Traditional event we have... University of Tennessee!”

Towards the front of the audience, there’s a flurry of white and tangerine, as Tennessee's team jumps to their feet.

Not exactly what he would have predicted, but Tennessee's program is well-developed, and usually scores high. He wishes again, that he could have seen their program.

George lets go of Karl’s hand briefly to clap as the line of cheerleaders take the stage, accepting their awards, then moving into position for a picture.

Once Tennessee is settled, the microphone crackles again.

*2nd place. They stand a shot at second place, right?*

“In second place... give it up for the University of Alabama!”

Squeals of delight sound from their left, and George’s stomach dips despite himself.

If Alabama made 2nd, and Cedar Point hasn’t been called, he knows it’s likely that they’re out of the running. Even with the near-perfect semi-finals performance. They didn’t even have the chance to watch Cedar Point after all– so who’s to say they didn’t score perfectly? It wouldn’t be the first time for their rival school.

He doesn’t even notice that they’re moving on to the final announcement until Karl smacks his arm excitedly.

“Finally, the moment you’ve all been waiting for... with a final score of ninety points, the national champion of the Co-Ed division is...”

George holds his breath.

“... Northview University!”

In an instant, screams erupt around him on all sides, and someone pulls him to his feet.

He looks around at his team blankly for a few seconds, jaw agape.

“George, we did it!!” Karl yells, shaking him by the shoulders, just as he starts to process exactly what’s just happened.

“We... holy shit... they just– they said us right?” He stutters, a rush of euphoria clouding his brain.

“Yes you idiot!”

Someone taps him on the shoulder, and George barely has time to look before Dream is lifting him over the seat by the armpits, before crushing him to his chest.

He giggles into his shirt, unable to stop smiling, even when Dream kisses him.

“I told you you’d win,” the blonde says with a grin, pressing their lips together once more, before lifting him back onto his own row, where his team has started to file towards the stage.

He shakes his head in awe once, blowing Dream a kiss before following the rest of the cheerleaders.

As the stage lights wash across his face, he shivers, looking out at the crowd.

He takes another step, and a loop of cool fabric is placed around his neck, the metal disc at the bottom heavy on his chest.

“C’mon, George!” Someone calls, and he looks up to see the team gathered together, trophy in hand.

As soon as he reaches the group, they hand it over to him.

“Are you sure you want me to-”

“Yes,” Niki interrupts, and several others nod along with her, eyes sparkling. “Now come closer, we’ve got to take the picture!”

Without any further hesitation, several hands push him lightly towards the center of the cluster, gesturing for him to hold up his pointer finger.

*First place.*

“Smile!”

*Who would have thought?*

\*\*\*\*\*

Of all the times George has been to Disney World, this has to be his favorite.

Dream is practically giddy as he leads them into the park, letting their intertwined fingers swing softly with each step.

It’s too warm today to be holding hands and brushing shoulders, but George only holds on tighter, leaning into Dream’s side as they talk, while waiting in line for the next ride.

“Your parents headed back this morning right?” Dream asks, pulling out a small bottle of sunscreen.

George nods. “Yeah, they were pretty tired out after all the excitement yesterday, and had some things to get done at home. They stopped by to say goodbye this morning though.”

“Oh, that was nice.”

“Mhm. My dad even got all serious out of nowhere though and told me how proud he was. Even gave me a hug. It was kind of weird.” George laughs. “I appreciated it anyways though.”

“That is a little hard to picture from him,” Dream admits, chuckling.

“What, you didn’t take the Vincent family for big huggers?”

"I know right, who would have thought?" Dream smiles as he talks, approaching him with open palms, a dollop of sunscreen rubbed between them.

George pauses, taking a step back. "What are you- hey, no, back off."

"C'mon just a little," Dream insists, "You're going to burn to a crisp out here."

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Why are you mothering me?"

"I'm not! Just- ugh, c'mere-"

One strong arm wraps around George's shoulders, holding him tightly in place. As he tries to wiggle out of his grip, Dream rubs some of the cool substance into the back of his neck, and spreads a little bit across the bridge of his nose. George wrinkles it immediately in retaliation.

Once he's content with his handiwork, Dream steps back. "See! There."

"You're so annoying."

"Oh shoot, forgot your ears-"

George scoffs loudly, holding up a hand to keep him from getting any closer.

"Not one more move from you. If my ears are gonna sunburn, so be it."

Dream raises his hands in surrender, clicking his tongue a few times. "Alright. Your funeral, baby."

He feels himself flush a little at the nickname, but masks it quickly by elbowing Dream, pointing ahead of them where the line has started to move.

"Go, idiot," he mutters teasingly, placing a hand on Dream's back to guide him forward.

If Dream notices anything unusual, he doesn't say so, eagerly craning his neck to see if they're nearing the front as they move.

Behind him, George smiles, a little hidden smile, and tucks the moment away to remember later in the privacy of his room.

When he can lay in bed and hold his sunburnt ears, mouthing the word *baby* till it's all soft and muddled in his head, sleep taking him slowly away to nothingness.

As his eyelids grow heavy, *baby* dissolves into a different string of words, gently circling his consciousness with each heartbeat.

*I love you, I love you, I love you.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Despite having seen the competition in person, Dream still invites George over to watch the recording after the trip, snuggled up on the couch, just like they planned.

Dream hogs the blanket, and George spends a good deal of the time complaining about how

awkward it is to watch himself on camera, but somehow, it's still perfect.

Two weeks have passed since they've gotten home from Orlando, and though life has picked right back up to its usual busyness, George still replays that weekend in his head often. The feel of the medal being slipped around his neck, the delighted cheers of his teammates as Northview's name was read, the feeling of Dream's hands on his waist, lifting him into the air in celebration. All of it remains painted in gold in his memory.

"I still don't know how you manage to look so put together doing all that," Dream mumbles into his shoulder, gesturing at the TV, where streaks of green and silver fly across the stage. "If I had to smile the entire time I was on the field during football games, I would drop the ball five seconds in."

"I guess I'm just a genius," George hums, kissing him on the bottom of his jaw.

"I guess you are."

George waits another minute or two, letting the video clip finish, before making a move to stand, slowly detangling himself from his boyfriend's arms.

"What are you doing?" Dream whines, grabbing a hold of his hand reflexively.

"We've got to go wash the dinner dishes, remember? Before we get too tired and forget."

"Leave the dishes. Come back here and kiss me instead."

George flicks him lightly on the forehead. "No. Tempting but no."

He wraps his hands around Dream's forearm, heaving him to his feet. "C'mon. It won't take long."

Dream grumbles a little, mostly for show, but shuffles obediently after him.

Under the low kitchen light, bulb lazily flickering overhead, they find their places at the sink together— as it always has been, with their elbows bumping and their heads tilted towards each other as they speak in soft tones.

They talk about everything, and nothing at all, voices warm and honeyed.

Two pairs of hands find a rhythm under the stream of warm water, with Dream washing and George drying. Porcelain and glass is passed between them without the need to even think, bodies moving of their own accord as they discuss upcoming exams, and plans for Valentine's Day.

As they breathe together, fond smiles and gentle nudges exchanged every once in a while, George thinks back on the early days in this kitchen. When everything still brimmed with a fragile mix of hope and uncertainty, sure to shatter at any moment.

As if reading his mind, Dream speaks.

"Do you remember the first time we did this together?"

George looks up at him. "Did what?"

"Stayed up way too late watching movies. Cleaned the kitchen and talked until we couldn't stay awake."

"Yeah," he replies quietly. "I remember."

Dream watches, lost in thought, as George dries the glass beside him.

“We talked about things that scared us.”

They did. He remembers.

“You said heights at first,” George comments, and Dream smiles subtly.

George’s voice softens. “And then after a while... you said you didn’t know who you were. That scared you.”

Dream nods, slowly. The smile relaxes into something more contemplative.

“And you were afraid of not being enough. For... everyone, I guess,” he says, scrubbing absentmindedly at the plate in front of him.

George’s stomach dips a little.

It’s true, but hearing the confession out loud is a little jarring.

It’s relieving too, though. Refreshing. Like talking about all these things now wipes the slate clean.

Looking up, he realizes Dream has gone still next to him, fingers poised delicately on the now-stopped water spout.

“You...” His lips form the word, then stop, pressing together.

George waits in silence for a moment. When Dream doesn’t speak, he places a hand on his arm.

“Dream?”

Dream looks down. “You said... y-you wanted...”

A memory enters George’s head, his past words filling the space.

“To really love someone,” he supplies quietly.

“And to be loved wholly in return,” Dream finishes.

The statement hangs in the air, heavy over both of their heads.

A moment passes in silence.

Dream stares at the ground.

George stares at the wall.

Then, little by little, they find each other again.

As Dream’s gaze flickers up to meet his, George isn’t sure that his heart won’t burst.

His eyes are bright, expression painfully tender.

“I told you I’d make you wait,” Dream says, slowly, and George resists the urge to grab him by the collar and pull him in.

“Well I can’t wait any longer,” he huffs, splaying his hands gently on Dream’s chest.



“Can’t you?”

“I’ll kill you.”

“I’m going to say it now.”

“If you don’t, I will.”

But Dream’s bluff falls away in an instant, as he kisses George hard into the countertop, cradling his face to his.

And then, with a puff of air against his cheek, he tells him.

“I love you.”

George breathes, closing his eyes briefly.

He grips him by the collar now. “Again.”

Another kiss, firm against his lips.

“George Vincent, I love you.”

“Again.”

“I love you. Wholly.”

Another kiss.

“Completely.”

Another.

“With every damn fiber of my being.”

George kisses him back with all the strength he can muster, head spinning and heart pounding.

He doesn't say it back until hours later, when soft rays of sunlight peek through the blinds of Dream's bedroom, falling upon twisted sheets and tangled limbs. He doesn't know if Dream hears him then, as his chest rises and falls slowly, eyes closed.

But George whispers it anyway, lips brushed against the shell of his ear.

*“I love you. I love you. I love you.”*

## Chapter End Notes

Just some fun facts about this chapter:

- The album that George and Karl listen to on the bus is called *How Do You Love?* by The Regrettes, which heavily inspired this fic! I like to think of it as the unofficial

soundtrack ;). You can listen to it [here](#) if you'd like!

- I have a playlist for this fic that I've been adding to for the past year! Give it a listen if you'd like [here](#)

- The final scene at the end is one I had planned since day 1 of writing and it was originally going to happen way earlier! I ended up liking where it ended up here instead

- Although I do not do cheer, and though I adjusted some things for the sake of the story, I did do a ton of research about the real life UCA Cheer Nationals to write this chapter! Everything from watching participant vlogs to reading permission forms. It was really cool to learn about, and I hope I sort of did it justice.

- A lot of the competition section was based off of my own experiences attending Shakespeare/our state acting competition during Jr. High and High school. Even the whole bit with George thinking they stood no chance at placing first, because their rival school hadn't placed yet, was based off my experience.

- I didn't originally plan to include any scenes with Dream and George going to Disney World, but found through my research that that is where UCA nationals often take place! So I figured I'd include it just for fun ;)

Feel free to follow me on [Twitter](#) and come shout in dm's with me, or leave a comment here with your thoughts!

(Also reminder the epilogue is also up, so don't click away just yet!)

# Epilogue

## Chapter Summary

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He pauses for a moment, then speaks again, pointedly.

“Why hello,” Dream says. “You’re very pretty.”

At first, George is sure Dream has lost his mind entirely.

And then, an image starts to recreate itself in his brain.

## Chapter Notes

Enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George wakes suddenly, muggy August air still sticking to him as he blinks in the darkness of his room.

There’s a vague sense that *something* brought him back to consciousness, but as he looks around, everything seems to be in its place.

He rolls over to look at his clock.

2:15 A.M.

School doesn’t start for another five hours, so it’s not the alarm. Odd.

He does one last scan of the room, and after assuring himself that nothing has fallen over or been broken into, George lets himself start to drift back off to sleep, pulling up the covers that have been subconsciously kicked into a disorganized heap.

Only a few seconds later, he jolts, as his ringtone goes off at full volume. He reaches for his phone, wincing as the brightness of the screen washes across his face.

George scrambles to find the silent button in the dark, already grumbling to himself about giving the caller a piece of his mind..

“Who the hell is trying to reach me at-”

A familiar photo flashes on the screen.

Oh.

George picks up.

“What do you want, weirdo?” He greets, sighing into the receiver as he flops back on his bed.

*“ Geez, at least try and be nice, Georgie,”* Dream’s voice filters through the speakers. *“A ‘hello love of my life, nice to hear from you, favorite person in the world’ would suffice .”*

George scoffs. “You wish.”

There’s a faint chuckle on the other end, and George smiles.

When Dream doesn’t immediately continue, he glances back at the clock.

“For real though, what’s got you calling me in the dead of night?” He questions, “Feeling lonely?”

*“ Not exactly ,”* Dream replies with a laugh. *“ Go look out your window .”*

George’s expression morphs into one of confusion.

“Uh... okay?”

Quietly, he pads across the room, socked feet meeting the plush carpet until they come to a stop at the window. Curiosity getting the better of him, he quickly pulls the string to open the blinds.

It’s hard to see him at first, but as his eyes adjust to the dark, he catches sight of the tall figure under the streetlamp.

*Dream.*

He’s a little nervous, George can tell as much, even from this distance, watching as he shifts back and forth on his feet.

In one arm, he cradles a bouquet of flowers, trying to keep them from slipping as he readjusts the phone held to his ear. In the other, he holds what looks to be some sort of picnic basket.

The smile that breaks through on George's face is involuntary, nearly making his cheeks hurt.

“What’s the occasion?” He sputters out, tilting his forehead forward so it presses against the cool glass of the window.

*“ You’ll see ,”* Dream replies easily. *“ Now hurry and get down here, my arms are getting tired .”*

George doesn’t need to be told twice.

Heart racing, steps light, he practically dances around the room, throwing on a T-shirt and shoes, before leaving the apartment.

By the time he gets out, Dream has put the basket and the flowers back in his truck, but still waits at the edge of the walk.

“Hi baby,” he says with a grin, as George runs into his arms.

A kiss is planted on the top of his head, then on both cheeks.

“You’re crazy, do you know that?” George giggles, ruffling his hair once before kissing him back.

“Don’t even lie, you love it,” he hums in reply, linking their elbows together and starting down the street. “Now c’mon, get in the truck.”

After a quick, teasing poke, George complies.

The drive only lasts a couple minutes, soft radio music playing between them as George watches familiar streets and houses go by.

It isn't until they pull into the parking lot that he realizes their destination.

“You do know we don’t have to go to school for a few more hours,” he teases, eyeing Dream curiously.

The blonde unbuckles his seatbelt and scoffs, reaching for the items in the backseat.

“We’re not going to the school, idiot,” he says, passing George a large, folded up blanket. “Now are you gonna help me or what?”

Together, they transfer Dream’s assortment of supplies out of the truck, before closing and locking the doors behind them.

“Lead the way,” George hums, though he has an inkling of where they might be going.

“Don’t mind if I do,” Dream replies, starting forward with the picnic basket swinging in his hand.

They trudge forward through the empty parking lot for a few minutes, before passing through the (suspiciously unlocked) chain link gate George has crossed so many times before.

As the empty football field comes into view, he smiles.

“You’ve always been one for nostalgia haven’t you,” he says quietly bumping Dream’s shoulder softly with his own.

“Oh, lay off,” Dream chuckles, bumping him back.

“No, no, I think it’s cute,” George assures, kissing his own fingertips, then patting them on Dream’s cheek.

It’s too dark to see it, but he knows he blushes.

They don’t stop until they reach the middle of the field, finally unloading the items in their arms there.

Each of them takes a corner of the blanket, flicking it in the air once, before laying it down atop the grass.

Next comes the picnic basket, which is unloaded with fake candles, delicately-wrapped turkey sandwiches, and an unopened bottle of wine.

“Look at us, living the high class life,” George comments, pressing his face into the flowers and inhaling deeply.

“Anything for you,” Dream says in return, grinning as he removes the cork from the bottle.

“Though I did forget the glasses at home, so we’ll have to be a little bit uncivilized with this.”

George laughs, laying back on the blanket and setting the bouquet aside. “I suppose I can manage.”

He closes his eyes, breathing in the night air for a while until Dream taps him with his foot, handing him one of the sandwiches.

George takes it gladly, rolling onto his stomach to unwrap it.

“I still can’t figure it out, by the way,” he mumbles around a mouthful of food.

Dream tilts his head at him. “Figure what out?”

“Why you decided to do all this? Are we celebrating something?”

In the candlelight, Dream’s eyes flicker with amusement.

George pauses. “Wait...” He sits up abruptly. “Did we win the bid on the apartment? I thought we wouldn’t find out for another few days!” He gets out hurriedly, heart racing.

Dream laughs. “Oh. No, it’s not that. I still haven’t heard back from them.”

George groans, and Dream pats his leg in sympathy.

“Don’t worry. I’m sure we’ll find out soon,” he says. “And then you’ll be stuck with me twenty-four seven.” To emphasize his point, he dips his head, peppering George’s stomach with barely there kisses, blowing a raspberry into his skin for good measure.

“Get off,” George whines, trying to shove him away. “If you don’t– stop that *tickles* – if you don’t quit it I’m moving in with Sappnap instead.”

Dream stops suddenly, delivering the most shocked and offended face he can muster.

George shoves him. “Just go *on*, already. Tell me why we’re actually here.”

“Ok, fine.”

With a ridiculous amount of bravado, he takes a swig of the wine, and stands, taking a few steps off of the blanket.

George narrows his eyes at him. “I don’t see how this is-”

“You too,” Dream interrupts, waving him over impatiently.

Reluctantly, George gets up, going to join him on the perfectly trimmed turf.

“Okay, you stay there,” Dream explains, situating George into the right place, “Then, I go right here.”

Dream comes to a stop a few feet away. After glancing at George to make sure he’s paying attention, he lies flat on his back, chin facing up towards the brunet.

“Ringing any bells?” He says after a moment, and George shakes his head, making a noise of confusion.

“How is-”

“What about now?” Dream asks, waiting for him to make eye contact.

He pauses for a moment, then speaks again, pointedly.

“Why hello,” Dream says. “You’re very pretty.”

At first, George is sure Dream has lost his mind entirely.

And then, an image starts to recreate itself in his brain.

Dream. On the grass. Staring up at him. Mumbling those very words, to what was at that time, a stranger.

“I think I remember you being a little less... clothed.” He smirks.

Dream’s smile widens. “So you do remember. I thought you might have forgotten.”

“How could I?” George replies. “You made quite an impression.”

Dream runs a hand down his face, reddening in embarrassment.

“I was quite the charmer,” he mutters, and George snickers.

As Dream sits back up, George thinks back to that day.

“So it’s been...”

“One year since we met, yeah. One year exactly.”

“You are insane,” George marvels, shaking his head lightly. Still his stomach flutters in giddiness at the thought that he would remember something like that. “And also very sweet.”

“Wow, a George compliment, this is a win. It was all worth it,” Dream replies, grinning up at him.

“And the football field is-”

“Nostalgia, just like you said. I mean, I kind of fell in love with you here.”

George smiles, softly, moving over to kneel beside him.

“You know what?” He murmurs, tenderly brushing the blond’s hair away from his eyes.

Dream blinks up at him, slowly, eyes soft. “What?”

“You are incredible,” he breathes, “And I love you. And I’d like to kiss you.”

Without any hesitation, as tanned hands go to his air, and emerald eyes flutter close, George does.

And as their lips press together, in that soft, sweet way that has grown to feel as easy as breathing, George thinks silently to himself that he’ll never tire of the feel of Dream smile against him.

He’ll never tire of the way it feels like coming home.

## Chapter End Notes

And with that, one year later, All is Fair in Love and Football is completed.

If you have any thoughts/questions/comments about the fic, or what happens after, feel free to message me on [Twitter](#), or leave a comment! I'll try to respond to as many as I

can. I would love to hear everyone's final thoughts!

Also, if you would like to check out more of my fics, you can access them [here](#). Consider User Subbing to me, so you can be notified about future fics! I'm about 3/4 through my next full length fanfiction, (a dnf breaking up/getting back together AU-based on the EP "Intertwined" by Dodie), so keep an eye out for that!

Also, though I will not be writing a sequel to All is Fair, I am not against writing a one shot or two in the future, whether that's of deleted scenes or events that take place in the future. (I think a wedding one shot would be particularly fun, with George and Dream's family's driving each other crazy)- so let me know if that's something you would be interested in! Maybe I'll figure out a User Sub goal and write on when I reach that, who knows.

Overall, thank you again so much for all the love and support for AIFILAF, it has been such a fun journey writing it.

-Grace <3

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!